



Boy in the Hood

by Benjamin J. Stein

Wednesday

A beautiful day in Sunny Southern California. I wrote about bonds in the morning, and then strolled out the door of the mighty Shoreham Towers to lunch. As I walked out, I saw some of my favorite people. My soon-to-be co-star, Alexander Godunov, a famous ballet dancer and actor. A stunningly beautiful Italian girl who has come here with her Mom from Milan to model. A local newscaster named Pat Lalama who always seems to be talking about news that makes a life-or-death difference to her. A lawyer named John who drives a Rolls-Royce. My beautiful neighbor, Allison, who was washing her car across the street. They all greeted me, and I felt I had friends, a rare feeling for me in Los Angeles.

I strolled down Shoreham Drive, past a little swimming pool where a buxom woman was sunbathing, past a furniture store, and then past an almost unbelievably gorgeous woman putting quarters into a parking meter next to her Jaguar convertible. She looked at me as if she were a Dun & Bradstreet optical scanner, computing by appearance how much money I had. Clearly not enough, because she soon filled the meter, turned, and walked past me as if I were the beggarly failure that I am.

Across the street, I met my pal Larry Wilson for lunch. Larry was one of my best students when I taught at

UC-Santa Cruz, 10 these twenty long years ago. I taught about the political content of film, and how anti-business it was. Larry and his fellow students would look at me, make faces, and explain to me how important it was to be a vegetarian. Once they showed me something called a slip-n-slide.

A slip-n-slide, a vestige of the days when the vandals were truly taking the crowbars to Western civilization, was an artificial waterway laid out on the top floor of the B-dorm of College V. It would be filled with water and mineral oil. The students would take their clothes off, slip and slide around in it, eat mushrooms, and then head off to mud baths at Big Sur to watch the sun rise. All subsidized by the taxpayers of the state of California. Great, huh?

You can get an idea of how well I fit in there if you know that out of a total

campus vote of about 1,500 cast for president in 1972, I was one of three votes for Richard M. Nixon. Fourteen hundred and ninety-seven went for George McGovern, who turned out to be even nuttier than any of us had thought.

Larry, who is now a magician, ate salad with me and reminisced about the guys who repaid me for supporting Nixon by putting a huge swastika near a likeness of RN, and about the lovable rascal of a faculty member who insisted that it was my Jewish money craziness (or something similar)—and not students putting up a Nazi emblem next to the president—that was the problem. Ah, those were the days.

A lovely woman sat down at the table next to us. As is my habit, I started to ask her all about herself. She told me she was just arrived from Georgia, the single mom of a four-year-old, a fledgling songstress in search of a job and a playmate for her son. I told her that she could bring him over to swim at the mighty Shoreham Towers at her leisure. It made me feel very grand to make the offer, I can tell you that.

On my way back to the Shoreham Towers, Larry and I reminisced some more. It sounds strange, but even though I was odd man out at Santa Cruz, I was happy among those redwoods and in those meadows. One day in September, I took a stroll with a girl named Jan and we stopped and sat on a bed of redwood and pine leaves and needles (maybe just needles) and I kissed her. That's all.



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Just a kiss, and I think that was the happiest moment of my life until I met little Mr. Delicious Perfect. Well, maybe also after I saw my wife in her wedding dress in Fort Myer Chapel in 1968. But I never saw Jan again. If anyone knows a Jan Looney (real name) from Santa Cruz, please let me know.

Thursday

An amazing evening with my pal Sally the Madam. Sally is a real person who lives by her phone night and day arranging "photo shoots" for beautiful girls with wealthy, almost always much older, men. She used to be an actress, and she has an almost perfect voice. It can be sarcastic, friendly, mocking, businesslike, all in a moment.

She lives in Santa Monica, and I sometimes sit in her Spartan apartment watching her operate. She gets a call from a man. He wants a girl at ten at night, but he'll only pay five hundred. "But, honey," Sally says. "That means I don't get anything. Can't you just make it six? What difference does a hundred make?"

Then she calls a girl. "Remember Tad?" she asks the girl. "He wants a photo shoot. Yeah. He'll go five, but it'll only be for an hour."

The girl is obviously balking.

"Debby," says Sally in her most honed tones, "he really likes you. I'm sorry that he was rude to you and hadn't showered last time. That doesn't mean he doesn't like you. And I promise he won't have his bodyguards there, and if he does, that'll be another five for each of them."

"I hate her," Sally says when she gets off the phone. "She always calls bugging me because she wants work, and then just because this guy told her she was fat last time, she doesn't want to see him."

Another call. "Yes, yes," she says excitedly. "Yes." She listens and then she says, "I'll try."

Sally gets off the phone, opens another Michelob, and heaves a sigh. "That's Prince A.," she says. "From Saudi Arabia. He wants a girl, only she has to be under 21 and she can't be a pro. It has to be her first time working for money."

"Why don't you tell him you can't do it?" I said. "In fact, why don't you tell them all you can't do it, and then not do

it anymore? You know you hate it. That's why you have to be drunk to do it at all. Just stop doing it. Become a lawyer. Become a theatrical agent. Maybe an accountant. Just so you don't have to peddle flesh anymore."

"But I love doing it," Sally insists as I watch her swig more beer and shake her red hair. "I love making people happy."

"I wonder who you're making happy," I mused aloud. "You're always telling me how miserable the girls are, how they're on drugs, how they hate their clients . . ."

"Only some of them hate their work," Sally said. "Some of them have told me that even if they got married, they'd still want to work."

Sally turned back to her phone and started calling around to try to find a new girl for Prince A. No luck. No luck even reaching someone to ask. As she frowned, she saw me looking through her photos of her girls, most of them long obsolete and all with phony names. "How about you, Ben?" she asked brightly.

"What about me?"

"Maybe you know a girl who'd like to make twenty-five hundred tonight? A new one. One who's never worked before."

"Are you crazy? Are you out of your mind?" I demanded. "You must truly be insane."

"Well, it was just a thought," Sally said with a girlish laugh (which told me something about the authenticity of girlish laughs). "Besides, you'd be surprised at how many women would work to earn some extra money. A lot of women that you'd never suspect it about. Even housewives."

"The point isn't about them," I said. "It's about me. Do you think in your wildest dreams that I'd send someone I know to hook for a Saudi prince? For anyone? I wouldn't even consider it. My goal is to get you to stop, not get someone else to start."

Sally shrugged. "I'd give you the whole commission," she said hopefully.

Hart Crane wrote a beautiful poem that always makes me think of call girls and madams:

*O brilliant kids,
Frisk with your dog,
And fondle your shells and sticks,*

*Bleached by time and the elements,
But there is a line you must not cross,
Nor trust spy cordage of your bodies
to
Caresses too lichen-faithful from too
wide a breast.
The bottom of the sea is cruel.*

Actually, the poem makes me think of life in Los Angeles generally. Kids on a beach playing dangerous games.

Friday

There's a reason why they call it "development hell." Development is what happens when you sell an idea or get a producer interested in an idea, and then have meeting after meeting to get the idea "nailed down." You take your fresh, gleaming, personal work of creativity to someone who does this for a living, and the gold turns into sodden work.

This afternoon, I'm at a studio in the Valley with my idea for a movie about an investment bank founded by Satan. It's a fine idea, so the boss of this operation has told me. He likes it and wants it

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**HILLSDALE
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to fly. So, he's gone out of town and left me with his "head of development," a 30-year-old graduate of Wesleyan with the unlikely name of Esau.

"We have to know what's motivating the hero," Esau says. Then he coughs a huge, wracking cough. "We have to see something real in this character," he adds, and then he sneezes and wipes his hand with his handkerchief after he's wiped his nose with it. "I want something really original that's never been done before, like what they did in *High Noon*," he says, and then he coughs again and wipes sweat off his brow.

Pretty soon I feel as if I'm in the typhoid ward in a hospital in Bangladesh getting suggestions on my story from a famous Deshi guru who happens to think that the only true fount of wisdom is the old episodes of "Gunsmoke."

Still, if we get this going, it'll mean . . . I don't know. It'll mean *something*. I'll get paid for it, and then I can spend the money and feel stupid for having spent the money. That's something. Or I can lose it speculating. That's also of some considerable value.

It feels awfully good to be outside, out on the lot, where I can have a hint of the westerlies that blow over the mountains in the afternoon.

Later, as I read the cruel *Wall Street Journal*, which is always telling me how much better off I'd be if I had done this differently or that differently, I got a call. It was the woman from Georgia. The single mom with the four-year-old. The one I had met at the restaurant a few days before.

"It's really hot," she said.

"Indeed, it is," I agreed, "and I'd love to have you come over and swim with me at the pool here. You and your son."

The woman, whom I'll call Lee, agreed.

An hour and a half later, Lee, her incredibly cute son, Wolfie, and I were all sitting in the jacuzzi at the Shoreham Towers. It was a balmy late afternoon, and we all felt pretty darned good to be in the sunshine, if I may say so.

"Hey," Lee suddenly said to me, "didn't you say you were a lawyer?"

"Yes, although I don't really practice except to write about securities law," I said cheerfully.

"Well, I sold some story rights to Warner," Lee said, "optioned them, actually, and maybe you'd take a look at the contracts for me."

"I can do that," I said. "It would be easy, but I'm jealous. I haven't sold any story rights in a long time. What was the story about?"

Lee frolicked in the bubbling water and showed off her trim figure in her black one-piece bathing suit.

"It's about the five years with David," she said, "and just what he was all

him, and my manager said, 'Yeah, go out and work with him if you want to wind up like Sharon Tate.'"

"What a scary guy," I said. "I wonder why he had so many women after him."

"Well, he was able to speak to women in terms of prophecy," Lee said. "Like he was able to tell them things about the Book of Revelations and the Book of Daniel that showed them exactly where they fit in, and he was able to explain prophecies that even the great rabbis and priests couldn't explain."

"How do you know the great rabbis and priests couldn't explain it?" I asked.

"David told us," Lee said. "Plus, I'm from the Bible Belt, and all of this stuff was new to me."

"I see," I said. "Well, anyway, what a loon he turned out to be. I mean, getting all those kids killed."

"You think he did that?" Lee asked. "I think the FBI did that. They weren't going to let someone who told people he was Jesus live."

Oh, boy. "Why not? There are a lot of people walking up and down Hollywood Boulevard who think they're Jesus. And say it. And anyway, if he wasn't a nutcase, why didn't he let those people out of the compound?"

"The people didn't want to get out of the compound," she said. "They knew the truth."

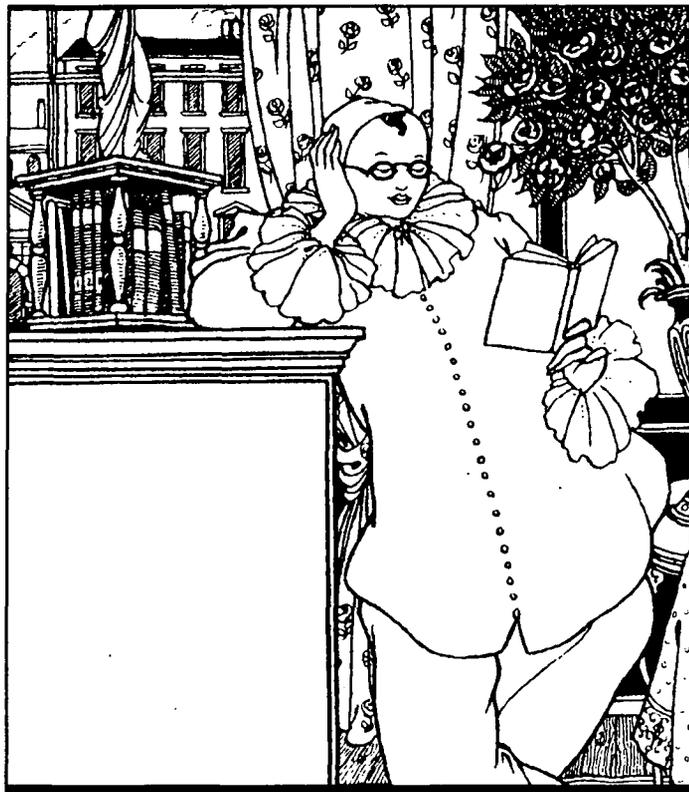
"What's the truth?" I asked.

"The truth is that The Fifth Seal says that the chosen of the lamb shall ascend to heaven in a fiery inferno," she said with an intense look in her

eyes. "Didn't you know that?"

"You know," I said after a moment, "I really have to go to dinner now with my little boy. Why don't you and Wolfie play here in the jacuzzi and in the pool for as long as you want, and I'll just call you next week and we'll get together to go over those contracts. How would that be?"

I went back to my apartment and looked at some old photos of my father in front of the Federal Reserve Board, maybe in 1937 or 1938. He looks so happy and so young. Then there's a photo of my mother and my father on the



about."

"David?" I asked. "David who?"

"David the musician," she said earnestly. "David Koresh."

"You're kidding, I hope," I said. "I mean, I assume you're joking."

"Not at all," she said. "I met him when he was a guitarist back east, and he really wanted for me to join his band. He was always calling me from Waco to ask me to come with him and we'd have a band."

"Wow," I said. "What a crazy guy."

"Yeah," Lee said. "I told my manager about him, and my manager talked to

deck of their house in Silver Spring, back in 1958, I would guess, and my mother looks so young and pretty, and I can still recall vividly how the Sligo Creek Park breeze would come up over the deck at night, bearing fireflies and the beguiling smell of decaying leaves.

I can hardly remember any people I knew seeming to be crazy then. What happened? How did it all change? Was I always destined to leave the land of sane people and live among crazy people?

I found a poem that my mother had sent me a few days before:

*Oh, when you're young
And the words to your tongue
Like the birds to Saint Francis
With darting, with dances
—Wait, you say, Wait!
There's still time! It's not late!*

*And the next day you're old
And the words all as cold
As the birds in October
Sing over, sing over,
Sing Late! Late!
And Wait! You say, Wait!*

Sunday

Ah, but then there's Lani Guinier. I like her. She makes the people I deal with here day after day seem sane. A woman who explicitly wants to have a race war, who explicitly doesn't believe in the Constitution, who wants to enshrine racial divisions in law, and to put up a litmus test to make sure other blacks are sufficiently racist for her. That's good thinking, Bill. Good work, Hillary.

Scratch a Clintonite, and you find a very angry person. Look at those faces. Donna Shalala. Robert Reich. Hillary. Warren Christopher. These are angry people. Ira Magaziner. Intense. Oh, George Bush, why couldn't you have campaigned halfway decently? Why did you turn us over to these people? A woman who has written articles against the Constitution as head of the Civil Rights division? Why not a Nazi sympathizer? Why not David Duke?

Oh, precious Tommy, watching Ren and Stimpy at my knee, what's to become of your America?

On the other hand, maybe Lani Guinier knows certain prophecies and the meaning of the Sixth Seal.

Thursday

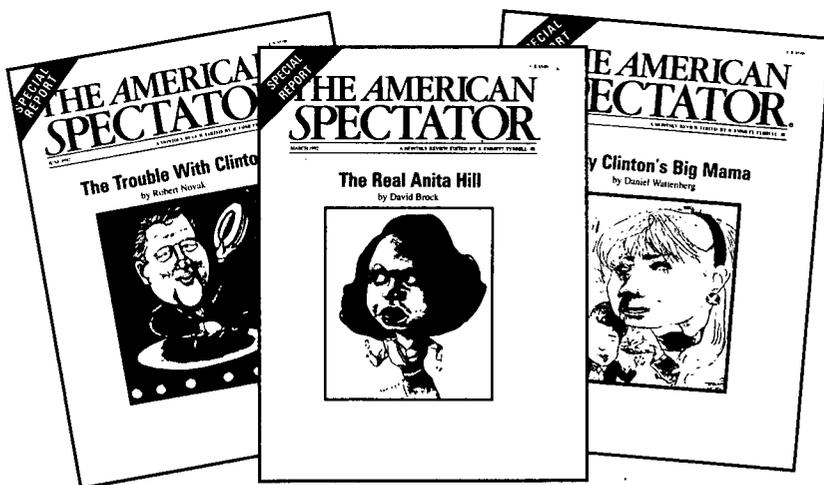
Drama class for Tommy Stein. Today, he's in his first play and I'm on my way to watch him. It's a very short five-year-old's version of Little Red Riding Hood. The teacher, a stern-looking woman with (you guessed it) silver and topaz jewelry, said that Tommy was going to play Little Red Riding Hood and another little boy, Lionel, was going to play the wolf. "This is to show that the weaker part does not always have to be played by a

woman," she said. Tommy played his part beautifully and burped in the middle.

Then there was an all-girl version of Sleeping Beauty, in which one five-year-old slapped a sleeping woman comrade to awaken her. "The moral of this story," said the drama teacher, "is that a strong woman does not need a man to save her. Strong women can save each other."

One of the mothers leaned over to me. "Yeah," she said, "but who's gonna lend us money?" □

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What a Character!

by John Corry

No doubt about it; Bill Clinton was in trouble. "The Incredible Shrinking President," the *Time* cover shouted, while *Newsweek* asked, "What's Wrong?" Just about everything, apparently—bad staff work, murky policies, and Harry and Linda Thomason—although the unanswered question was not what, but why. That the White House was a mess was self-evident, but there was a reluctance to associate this with character flaws in the president or to suggest that he was not up to the job. Media rules required reporters and correspondents to seek other explanations, some fanciful in the extreme.

There was, for example, Katie Couric ("asking the questions only Katie Couric could ask," the NBC promo said) in a one-hour interview with Hillary Rodham Clinton. Couric said Mrs. Clinton "may be one of, if not the, closest advisers to the president." Then she moved in on the touchy stuff.

"Had you been keeping your eye on the ball, you would have said, Hey, Bill, don't do that," Couric said, suggesting that Mr. Clinton's problems had arisen because Mrs. Clinton had failed to exercise oversight. Mrs. Clinton demurred, however, and said Bill could take care of himself.

Nonetheless, the controversy over Lani Guinier was raging even as Mrs. Clinton and the chirpy Ms. Couric spoke. The president had just pulled Guinier's nomination as as-

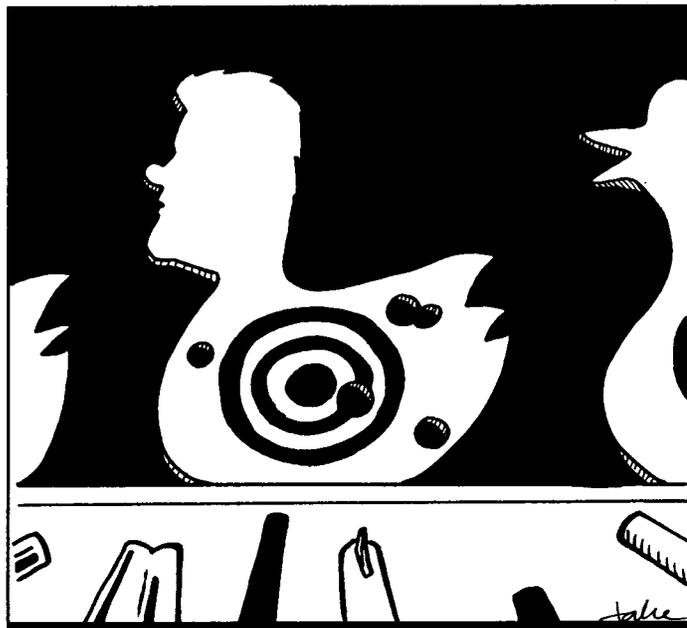
sistant attorney general for civil rights, while claiming he had only that day read her writings. "I have to tell you," he said at a news conference, "that had I read them before I nominated her, I would not have done so." He denied this had anything to do with a calculated move to the political center. "I would say this is about my center," he said, "not about the political center."

Thus the obvious question: Where was the president's center? When a very uncomfortable Al Gore appeared on "Nightline" to explain further why Guinier had been dumped, he said her writings represented "a set of ideas the president doesn't agree with." Ted Koppel dryly pointed out then that the ideas were "precisely the things" the press had been discussing for weeks. Why hadn't the president been disturbed about them before?

Meanwhile, the same night Gore

was talking to Koppel, Clinton was talking to the *New York Times's* R.W. Apple. It was at a dinner in the White House, and as Apple reported two days later, it was attended by "journalists, Democratic leaders, businessmen, figures from the capital's cultural life," all of whom "sensed how much Mr. Clinton had at stake as he struggled to get his Presidency back on course." Over the beef Wellington, Apple wrote, Clinton spoke bitterly about what he described as "a campaign of right-wing distortion and vilification" of Guinier's views in the press. The president was particularly scornful, Apple wrote, about an op-ed piece in the *Wall Street Journal* by Clint Bolick. Its headline had called Guinier a "quota queen."

Obviously, there was confusion here. How could Clinton be disturbed by "precisely the things" the press was discussing if the press was full of "right-wing distortion and vilification"? It was all a tad difficult to follow, although it may be that Clinton had been misled when he read Anthony Lewis. The *Times* columnist had written that "Professor Guinier was the target of the most effective smear campaign seen in Washington since Joe McCarthy's day." Bolick, apparently, had led the campaign. Lewis identified him as "a protégé of William Bradford Reynolds, the right-wing zealot who wrecked civil rights enforcement in the Reagan Administration." Two days later, Lewis's colleague Anna Quindlen picked up the same theme. Bolick, she wrote, was a "conservative who has worked with William Bradford



John Corry is a former New York Times media critic and the author of *My Times: Adventures in the News Trade*, forthcoming from Putnam.