



# Gagapocalypse

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**Published:** 2011

**Categorie(s):** Fiction, Media Tie-In, Psychological, Short Stories, Visionary & Metaphysical, Satire

**Tag(s):** parody celebrity fame technology esoteric

## Viral

Back in the day people used to kill time by going to freak shows and shit to look at fat women with facial hair and kids with birth defects caused by the onset of the industrial revolution and the exciting new of poisons it introduced into our bodies. Or watch some idiot bite the head off a chicken or jam needles under his skin, although technically those guys weren't freaks in the biological sense; the only thing really wrong with them was a pathological need for attention combined with an obscenely low sense of shame and self-consciousness.

Nowadays, of course, being more civilized, we look back on all this with scorn, shaking our heads and tutting disdainfully at how crass and unenlightened previous generations were.

Because we have the fucking internet.

The first thing I do every morning is sit down in front of my computer, bring up my own web site, and watch my own webcam feed. Seriously, I just sit there and stare at my face on the screen for an hour or so, not doing anything or saying anything, just watching me watch myself. Usually it's an hour, but it depends on my mood, I've gone as little as twenty minutes or as long as three hours. It's like what Pollock said, how do you know when you've finished a painting, how do you know when you've finished making love?

The site dashboard says there's currently nine thousand people logged on and watching me. This is a little more than usual, probably due to the girl-shaped lump in the bed visible over my shoulder. But I'll get to that in a second.

A message pops up in the chat window in the bottom right corner of the screen. Someone who's probably new to the site is asking what's going on, why I'm just sitting there staring at myself.

This question gets asked a lot. I never respond, but the regulars always jump in to give their pet theories. Most assume this daily ritual is my attempt at some kind of performance art, like it's a statement about our pervasive celebrity culture or internet narcissism. They probably want to turn it into a video installation hanging in some trendy gallery, probably name it "digital ouroboros" or something equally douchey.

But it's not about art, I'm not making any statement. The truth is that I do it out of necessity. Because I'm at the point now where the mere sight of myself makes me sick. So I have to desensitize myself to my own image first thing when I wake up, otherwise I'd spend the rest of the day

avoiding mirrors and retching every time I glimpse my reflection in a window or polished surface.

Today I've already put in two solid hours of staring at my putrid mug, and I'm still not ready to face the day. I've probably got an unusually high reserve of self-loathing to burn off. And the reason for that brings me right back to the girl passed out in my bed.

Her name's Karin, or maybe Keren, but probably not Karen, and we were introduced at the party last night by her label's A&R guy. She's the singer for some Swedish electro-trash duo who'd recently scored a minor hit with an ironic lo-fi cover of "Just Dropped In (To See What Condition My Condition Was In)". Her outfit was ridiculous, somewhere between Gaga and Karen O, like if the two of them had a lovechild (you're welcome for that visual), and that lovechild in turn had a drunker, sluttier best friend with an inferiority complex who overcompensated by "accidentally" flashing the paparazzi a peek at her latest vajazzling.

Still, Karin had the right mix of looks and thinly veiled self-loathing that that lures me in like an idiot to a Russell Brand flick, so I was hooked.

And surprisingly, she seemed to reciprocate. Although I'm pretty sure the only reason was that she assumed I was some kinda heavyweight producer, or at least a label exec's son. Generally people get into these kinds of parities by being hot, rich, or powerful. So if you're ugly and no one recognizes you, it's assumed that you must be rich and/or powerful. And by that measure, she probably figured my *fugly* ass had to be loaded.

But then it all got ruined when that actor came over and recognized me, that tubby neck-bearded bromance star.

"Hey! *U wanna make dance!*" he slurred loudly as he came staggering over, a can of Pabst clutched in his hand. "Look, it's the 'U Wanna Make Dance' guy!"

He could hardly stand, clinging desperately to his underaged Thai ladyboy escort, who was the only thing keeping him propped up on his feet. It reminded me of those cartoons where an ant is carrying an apple 400 times its size.

I tried to play it off to Karin like I didn't know what he was talking about, like maybe he was joking or had me mixed up with someone else. But then the bastard started singing.

*"U wanna make dance, u wanna make song, u wanna fun fun fun all night long..."*

In one instant Karin's face filled with recognition, and in the next it collapsed into naked disappointment.

Yes, I am the "U Wanna Make Dance" guy from that stupid fucking YouTube video.

Nevermind that I've been playing in bands since I was 12. Nevermind the years I've spent trying to break into the music business, the shows I've played, the doors I've knocked on, the tireless nights spent perfecting demos and the days spent getting them into the right hands. Nope, all it took was one drunken night of ad libbing auto-tuned gibberish over a ridiculous beat that my friend Ramon threw together on his iPad.

One year and 93 million views later, I am and will forever be the "U Wanna Make Dance" guy. Admittedly, at first it was a rush, and I thought I could use it as a platform to launch my real music career. I started blanketing the internet, blogging about my newfound notoriety and my attempts to break into the biz, tweeting every mundane detail of my life, keeping a 24-7 webcam feed of my apartment. Using the money I picked up from a couple sponsorships, I decided to self-finance my own album to show the world what I could do, to prove I was a serious musician. It sold two thousand copies. Three million followers on Twitter and I only managed to sell two thousand fucking copies. I've got more people than that at any given time watching me scratch my nuts on my webcam.

So that was when the depression started kicking in. Which led to the drinking and the drugs. Which led to the public outbursts and punching that photographer and that whole regrettable VMA incident with the chinchilla. I don't need to rehash it here, you know all the stories. Because that's the fucked-up thing; the more reprehensible my behavior became, the more people flocked to my blog and web cam and tweets to get front row seats.

Anyways, back at the party Karin slipped away as fast as her imitation Manolos would carry her, leaving me behind in the meaty, beer-soaked embrace of the bromance star. He held me captive for a good thirty minutes, tearfully ranting about his desire to be taken seriously as an artist between chronicling in agonizing detail his various sexual conquests and exploding into bitter personal invectives against James Franco.

As he finally stumbled off, it struck me that he was like if John Belushi and Woody Allen hooked up and spawned some overgrown neurotic man-child, and I was so proud of that observation I tweeted it on the spot. Then it occurred to me that I make a lot of those *if x and y had a baby*

jokes, and that was probably because I am totally unfunny and untalented, so I just pluck flaccid clichés out of the zeitgeist and hope no one notices how unfunny and untalented I am.

The party started to wind down, and eventually Karin wandered back my way with that all too familiar look of diffident resignation.

In three weeks time, I'll find out the thing that tipped the balance in my favor was that she'd mentioned meeting me to her friend, who in turn told her that she'd heard I was hung like a horse who'd been mainlining Enzyte. But really the friend was getting me confused with someone else. Probably that "Chocolate Rain" guy. It happens a lot.

Later, as we were driving back to my apartment and Karin leaned over from the passenger seat to unzip my fly, needless to say she was sorely disappointed.

Luckily, or unluckily, depending on your point of view, three serendipitous factors aligned:

First, she was so stoned and/or self-loathing that she still came up to my place and submitted herself to fifteen minutes of my uniquely sweaty, grunty style of lovemaking.

Second, I always keep the webcam in my room turned on and streaming live to my site.

Third, seeing as she really didn't have a clear understanding of who I was and obviously did not spend much time trolling the ninth circle of internet celebrity hell, she was not aware of fact number two.

So now here I am, back at my daily ritual of staring at myself the way you'd stare at a really someone with a really funky sore or boil on their face—equal parts revulsion and fascination. I may be a sick man. I may be a spiteful man. But at least I admit it.

In five minutes time, she is going to wake up and see the slew of texts, tweets, and e-mails on her phone that she ignored last night while we hooked up in front of an online audience of thousands.

Undoubtedly there will be repercussions.

But until then, I am just gonna keep sitting here, staring at myself.

My site dashboard says there are 550,000 people logged in right now worldwide, watching me watch myself, undoubtedly waiting to see the epic ass-kicking in store for me when Karin wakes up. In the bottom right hand of a screen, in the little IM box, people are still debating the meaning of my bizarre little ritual. I've toyed from time to time with telling them the truth, but I don't think I ever will.

Because really they're asking the wrong question. What matters isn't why I'm watching myself, but why they are.

I wonder about the people on the other side of the screen. What kind of person would spend their precious free time watching me? Where do they go and what do they do after they log off? Do they go off to jobs, take their kids to the park, make love to their husbands and wives?

Does what they see me do stay with them, do they think about me as they go about their lives, do I have any influence on their behavior? I think so, I think they see the ugliness I create in this world and it implants itself in the back of their subconscious, manifesting itself in subtle ways as they go about the rest of their day. Making them feel entitled to cut off the driver in the next lane, to give the poor kid at Starbucks shit for putting one too many pumps in their foamless non-fat room-temp hazelnut latte. And of course it affects those people too, making their day just a little worse, making them lash out just a little harsh at the next person who crosses their path, and in that way my every single little act of ugliness can spread like a virus across the world through the wonder of modern technology.

And when think about that, I feel a chill in my bones, and it makes me smile.

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*Editor's note: This article originally appeared in the June 1st edition of [NAME REDACTED BY LEGAL COUNSEL], a free weekly newspaper in northern California. It is reproduced below in its entirety.*

## Music Review

★★★★★

**Album: Born This Way**

**Artist: Lady Gaga**

**Genre: Pop**

**Release: May 23, 2011**

**Label: Interscope**

Okay, so let me start off by saying that I'm with you. There's nothing I hate more than those pretentious first-person reviews where some wannabe Lester Bangs or Hunter Thompson is supposed to be talking about the thing he's reviewing, but really just ends up using it as an excuse to talk about himself.

I had every intention of doing this thing for real, of giving Gaga's new album a clean honest review.

But then...

Cut to me lying on my couch, blasting the album through my *Beats by Dre* high-definition over-the-ear headphones. Lit to the gills on turpentine-grade gin and a gram of strong hash, the realization quickly dawning on me that any attempt to review this album in the conventional sense would be futile.

And now...

Cut to me here, laying on the ground, blood streaming out of the giant gash in my head and pooling on the black-and-white-checkered floor. My hands are tied behind my back with the translucent yellow power cord from a floor lamp.

A few feet from my head lies the fiber optic Mary Magdalene statuette that she used to bash me over the head.

A few feet further still, she sits in an armchair, perched on the edge of the seat and holding out a steel nail file pointed at me like a gun, like she's keeping me at bay.

Finally, after twenty minutes of silent staring, she speaks.

“Love is like a brick,” she says. “You can build a house, or you can sink a dead body.”

“What the fuck?” I cough weakly, feeling the fear begin to swell in my chest.

She stands up and slowly crosses the room toward me, then places her bare foot on top of my face, mooshing down my cheek into an undignified Picasso-esque grimace.

“I would rather die than have my fans see me without a pair of heels on.”



But before I get to the review, or to the craziness that followed, first a little context. Let’s jump back to the other night, when the world did not end.

Cut to me sitting in a bar, Saturday night going on Sunday morning. I’m with a couple friends from high school, Jessie and Dolores. They were my best friends once upon a time, but then we drifted apart the way people do, nudged along by circumstance. Shortly after we graduated, Dolores’s sister killed herself in front of Jessie, and things got a little strained between them. Jessie quit the band we were trying to start, one of a series of failed bands for me, and then moved away to finish her degree. Dolores ran off to the city and shacked up with some guy who paid for her hormone treatments and surgery. Now, twelve years later, we were relegated to getting together once every few months whenever one of us was ensnared by misguided pangs of nostalgia.

Jessie spent most of Saturday night texting her girlfriend while half-heartedly listening to Dolores’s distinctive brand of stream-of-consciousness rambling. Tonight’s topics included the failure of the rapture to materialize, the crushing disappointment that was the British royal wedding, and the exciting prospect that Donald Trump may one day have control of the world’s largest nuclear arsenal.

I was keeping entertained by intermittently scribbling in my notebook, which I carried around to capture random thoughts and snippets of conversation that might be useful for an article or for the long-suffering screenplay I one day still hope to finish.

I drained down the last gulp of cheap gin and melted ice from my glass and checked my watch.

“12:06,” I said to Dolores with a grin. “It’s officially not May 21<sup>st</sup> anymore, and we’re still here.”

She screwed up her face with distaste, her lips caked thick with cherry red lipstick that she was no longer young enough to pull off without looking campy. "Oh well, there's always that Mayan Calendar thing next year. Here's hoping that might pan out."

"Actually, the Mayans didn't really think the world would end," I corrected. "It's supposed to be a time of radical transformation, the beginning of a new era."

She sneered, "Adam, honey, why do you always have to take the stupidest point of view in every argument?"

Then, just as our conversation hit a lull, a disembodied voice cut through the silence and declared over the bar's sound system, "It doesn't matter if you love him or capital H-I-M."

"Oh God, I'm so sick of this song," Jessie groaned without taking her eyes off her phone, as the tinny digital beat of Lady Gaga's "Born This Way" kicked in.

She tuned around to look at table of sorority girls who'd been monopolizing the jukebox all night and yelled, "You know, I liked this song so much better when it was called 'Express Yourself'."

This elicited the appropriate jeers, and I briefly wondered whether going over to apologize for my friend's behavior might net me any phone numbers.

Jessie turned back to us and continued her grumbling, "How could the world not have ended when the Whore of Fucking Babylon is already here?"

"I kinda like her," I ventured, earning me a vicious glare.

Dolores gave a little chortle. "You know she's a dude, right?"

"That's not true," I object.

"Or at least a hermaphrodite."

"Bullshit."

"It's true," Dolores insisted. "There are pictures online where she's wearing, like, spandex leotards and shit, and she's got her legs spread open," she paused to demonstrate, flashing me a look up her skirt, knowing it would turn me red, "and you can totally see the dick bulge."

I tried to think of a reply but came up empty, knowing that Dolores was just baiting me into saying something that she could twist around to prove how narrow my cis-hetero-male worldview was.

After a long awkward silence, she chirped mockingly, "Dick bulge, son. Dick bulge."

“Anyway,” I finally said, “my paper wants me to review her new album that’s coming out this week. They said, ‘Do another one of those cute little sarcastic stream-of-consciousness things you do.’”

“Why?” Jessie asked with an anguished cry, apparently offended enough to actually warrant slipping her phone back into her purse. “Why aren’t you giving coverage to some deserving indie band, some new artist struggling to make a name, instead of just providing one more flaccid body in the 24-7 sycophantic orgy slobbering over the world’s biggest superstar?”

Jessie, it should be noted, is also a journalist, albeit for what she refers to as a “real” newspaper, as opposed to the free weekly I write for. Also, despite her elitist conviction that her larger circulation somehow validates her more as a journalist. At the same time she resents that, from her perspective, my paper’s mediocrity gives me the freedom to write about things that her neatly-manicured and offensively-unoffensive corporate masters have deemed *verboden*. Things like unionizing sweat shop workers, or unionizing sex workers, or basically anyone forming a union while doing a job neither of us would ever have to do ourselves.

“What could you possibly have to say about her that hasn’t been said before?” she demanded.

I shrugged, almost apologetically, and tried to explain, “Well, a few months back I was having lunch with my editor, and I started telling her about a couple of right wing Christian websites I’d stumbled on that claimed Gaga is an Illuminatus. We were just bullshitting, you know, talking about crazy shit online, but she seemed interested, so I explained how they had all this very painstakingly analysis of all the esoteric symbolism in her videos and photo shoots. And I had to admit, they made a pretty compelling argument. Her tendency to pose with one eye covered or with two fingers spread on her face, framing one of her eyes in a V (or triangle). The Hello Kitty photo shoot inside a Masonic lodge. The pervasive birth, rebirth, and metamorphosis imagery. The crosses, both inverted and upright. Multiple allusions within her videos to mind control. Honestly, haven’t seen this much blatant occult and anti-Christian imagery in pop music since Marilyn Manson. Anyways, my editor was sufficiently amused and suggested that when the new album came out I should do a tongue-in-cheek review about some made-up hidden symbolism in it.”

Jessie rolled her eyes. “You’re only covering her because you want to fuck her.”

It should be noted that a good amount of the time I spent hanging out with Jessie in high school was motivated by wanting to fuck *her*.

I said, "Honestly, she's never really done anything for me sexually. I mean sure, she's got a great body, and obviously she's not shy about showing it off. But it's not about wanting to fuck her," I paused, struggling to find the right words, feeling the booze weighing down my tongue, making everything come out sluggish and misshapen. "I just admire her, you know. I'm fascinated by her. She's turned herself into a living, breathing work of conceptual art that both celebrates and condemns the narcissism of our culture. I guess there's part of me that identifies with her, and another part of me that wishes I could be more like her. Haven't you ever felt that way about an artist? It's like, I don't want to fuck her as much as I want to be her. I don't want to just take off her clothes, I want to peel off her skin and wear it around like suit."

"You mean like the guy in *Silence of the Lambs*?" Dolores chimed in.

"Yes," I responded, then hesitated. "Wait, um..."

"The guy that did that tuck scene," she continued, as if helping me along.

I stared at her blankly.

"You know who else has to tuck?"

I groaned.

"Dick bulge, son. Dick bulge."



I'm still on the floor, her bare foot still pressed down on my face, and she's making me stick out my tongue to lick it clean. She's smeared bright red lipstick all over my face then used it to scrawl "Holy Fool" on my stomach with an arrow pointing down to my cock.

I try in vain to explain myself between licks, "I'm not crazy, just a journalist. No, that's not all, though, I'm here as more than that. I'm a fan. I love you. Not sexually, though, I just want to wear your skin."

No response.

"Sorry, I know I must sound like a crazy person. Look, can you just say something? Say you understand, say you don't. Tell me to leave, call me a pervert, just say anything at all."

She removes her foot and kneels beside me, her leveling a vacant, mannequin-like gaze at me. "There's eyeliner on my knee and blood on my elbow. Shady."

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Cut to me coming home from the bar and laying out on my couch. Dre's on my head. Leaked copy of the new album on my iPod, freshly-downloaded via a prominent torrent site. Hash pipe in hand, notebook and pen resting on my belly, ready to review the shit out of this thing.

The album started off unassuming enough with "Marry the Night". The lyrics are typical angst-y teenager, black-lipstick and Sylvia Plath journal writing nonsense. "I'm gonna Marry the Night/I won't give up on my life/I'm gonna Marry the Dark/Gonna make love to the stars." Like Shirley Manson singing "I'm only happy when it rains" back when I was in school.

The next track, "Born This Way", is the lead-off single. You've probably heard it; it's been ubiquitous over the past month or so, but it's one of her blander singles, to my taste. The lyrics are some vague notion of empowerment. It's touchy-feely, everyone-gets-a-trophy-for-participation crap; the kind of thing that's turned the millennial generation into a bunch of gutless mama's boys who burst into tears if they don't get an atta-boy pat on the ass every fifteen fucking minutes. It's vapid, non-threatening sloganeering for the masses to give the illusion of control over their lives.

I start to get a little worried that I'm not gonna find anything with some real meat in it to use in my article.

*This is pointless*, I thought to myself. Why did I feel such a strong compulsion to find something to read into it? Did I need to create some intellectual, pseudo-ironic justification for enjoying an album, just because it's popular or commercial? Why do hipsters find it so hard to enjoy something for its own sake? Why can't it be enough to like a song because it's catchy and fun and demands absolutely nothing of you as a listener?

And just as I was ready to write-off the whole endeavor, things started to get weird.

The third track, "Government Hooker", jumped out immediately as being a much stronger song than the previous two, propelled by a manic beat with caterwauling refrain "As long as I'm your hooker."

But despite its bouncy, driving dance beats, there was a vaguely unsettling vibe to it. It didn't help that the verses consist of a series of brain-washed, *Stepford Wife*-ish come-on's: "I could be girl (Unless you want to be man)/I could be sex (Unless you want to hold hands)."

And then there was the random allusion to JFK in the bridge. Ostensibly a dig at his philandering, it still stood out awkwardly. I started scribbling more excitedly in my notebook.

Next came "Judas", which is another single so I've heard it before, although the juxtaposition to the last song gave it a much more menacing undertone. First off, there were more references to hookers and prostitutes, forming a clear bridge to the last song. And then she hit me with this line: "I'll bring him down/A king with no crown."

An image flashed in my head, frame 313 of the Zapruder film, JFK's head disintegrating into a fine red mist. Kevin Costner repeating, "Back, and to the left."

I could feel the hash really starting to work its magic on me, getting the creative, free-association juices flowing.

In my notebook I wrote: *Possibly invoking Masonic/Illuminist symbolism connected to the Kennedy assassination? Reference "King-Kill/33" essay by Downard, claims assassination was a performance of the "killing of the king" ritual required of initiates into the 33rd degree of Masonry.*

Which I know is a stretch, but this is how subliminal messaging really works, despite all that crap your preacher may have told you about backwards masking. When you read it one word at a time, it's either innocuous or nonsensical, but read only every third or fourth word and the pattern starts to emerge. The brain latches onto the strongest images that stand out, like the highest peaks of a mountain range that break through the clouds—death, crowns, crucifixion, JFK, killing the king—leaving the subconscious mind to connect the dots.

A few songs later came "Bloody Mary", which was about Mary Magdalene and shared a lot of common imagery with "Judas" with lines like, "I won't cry for you/I won't crucify the things you do," and, "Kill the king upon his throne/I'm ready for their stones."

In my notebook I wrote: *Overt allusions to Mary Magdalene, another prostitute, while subtext is King-Kill/33. Could be read to almost encourage or at least the violent removal of authority figures.*

*Angle for article: Gaga part of Illuminist MK-Ultra/Manchurian Candidate program to brainwash a cadre of hookers to assassinate political and economic leaders, the Stepford Hashishin.*

*Possibly also connected to Mary Magdalene/Rennes-le-chateau/Merovingian/Sirius axis of conspiracy theories, but try not to get too Dan Brown about it.*

I kept moving through the album. Most of the other songs are tamer, echoing earlier anthems of hollow-toothed youth rebellion like "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" and "Fight for Your Right to Party". But taken as

a whole, the album has a heavily anti-Christian, anti-establishment bent. I wrote: *Maybe the fundamentalists & evangelicals are right to be freaked out.*

I could feel the hash starting to make me edgy and unfocused.

There was one other song that struck me as significant, although I couldn't place exactly why at first. It was called "Electric Chapel" and had lyrics like:

*Follow me, don't be such a holy fool  
Follow me, I need something more from you  
It's not about sex or champagne  
If you want me, meet me at electric chapel*

Shit, it sounded like some kind of creepy recruitment pitch. I thought of that cult in the '70s, Children of God, that sent young women into bars to recruit men by going home with them and then hitting them with proselytizing as pillow talk.

Then my brain made another connection: electric as in light bulbs, as in illumination, as in Illuminati. Holy shit, did she intentionally name a song of after the Church of Illumination?

*Of course not, man, you're high as balls,* the clear-thinking, rational part of my brain responded.

My creative/drug-addled brain responded back: I'm not suggesting that she's actually part of some shadowy organization, obviously, but maybe she is into occultism. Wouldn't be the first popular entertainer, Jayne Mansfield and Sammy Davis, Jr. both palled around with LaVey.

*I thought what you were going for was ironic, tongue-in-cheek, I'm-a-hipster-and-I-read-books-so-that-entitles-me-to-make-fun-of-everything* vibe. *That's what you do, that's what you're good at. You keep talking like this and people will start to think you actually believe this crazy shit. Don't be that guy.*

Okay, but she could be throwing this shit in just to fuck with people, like how Lennon threw that "the walrus is Paul" line into "Glass Onion" to fuck with the *Paul-is-dead* conspiracy theorists.

*Yes, the Beatles! Everyone loves the Beatles, and everyone loves that pop culture referential shit. Now you're starting to talk some sense, man. Hidden messages to the true fans in the know, making fun of all those freaks and weirdos who just don't get it. You should fly to New York and ask her about it, just to see if you're right. That would be pure-fucking-gonzo journalism.*

Suddenly I found myself laying on the ground in an airport terminal, wedged between between a row of interlocked chairs and a window overlooking the tarmac, with no idea how I got there.

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"Tell me your confession," she demands, leading me back down the spiral staircase on a leash.

I take a hard swallow before answering, "I feel like I've betrayed my dreams, or maybe sometimes I think my dreams have betrayed me. I'd have been better served by simple dreams like marriage, family, stability. What right have I to dream of making my mark on the world?"

She makes a disapproving *tsk* with her tongue. "Dreams are never weak like we are."



Cut back to me in the airport, clambering to my feet, trying to figure out how I got there.

Presumably I'd taken a flight. In fact, the more I thought about it, I did vaguely remember sitting next to a middle-aged businesswoman who kept typing on her laptop while trying to ignore me spewing violently into the airsick bag.

At any rate, it wasn't as important how I got there, I decided; what mattered was what city I was in. Taking a moment to smooth out my clothes, I noticed a brown leather overnight bag at my feet. I didn't recognize it, but assumed it must have been mine, so I picked it up and rummaged through it until I found a boarding pass with the destination airport code printed on it: *JFK*. I also found an envelope full of twenty dollar bills that looked suspiciously like the entire contents of my savings account minus the cost of a one-way plane ticket.

I made my way out of the terminal and hopped in a cab.

"Where to?" the driver asked.

"I'm not sure," I answered. "Where would you recommend for a first-time tourist?"

"Well that depends what you're looking for? You looking for pussy?"

I considered it a moment. "No, not really."

"What are you, some kinda fag?" he asked in the kind of gravelly voice that you only hear from cab drivers in old movies.

"No, I like pussy," I responded defensively.

"Damn straight you do. Sit back, I know just the place."

I rode out the rest of the trip in silence until the cab pulled up to a hotel next to Central Park with a giant metal globe in front of the building. I pulled a couple of bills from the envelope and slipped them to the driver, and he slipped me back a purple business card. One side was

printed with a stylized eye in a pyramid design, while the reverse had a handwritten number: 333.

"When you get to the room, knock on the door three times long, three times short, then three times long again," he instructed. "She'll take good care of you."

I took the elevator up to the third floor. When I got to room 333, I gave the special knock, and a woman answered the door wearing a tasteful little red satin dress. She had short auburn hair and green eyes, and the first thing that popped into my head when I saw her was how much she looked like Jessie.

"Put the envelope on the dresser," she instructed while leading me into the room. Assuming that she meant an envelope with some money in it, I reached into my bag and tossed my envelope full of money onto the dresser. I briefly considered taking out a few bills to keep for myself, but I didn't want to look cheap and besides I was pretty sure that asking her how much money should be in the envelope would be a breach of protocol at this point, so I decided to play it safe and just give her all of it.

"What's your name?"

"Adam."

"Nice to meet you, Adam. I'm Celeste."

I could tell that she was lying and regretted that she knew my real name but I didn't know hers, sensing that some power dynamic had shifted.

"You can take your clothes off and lie down on the bed," she said, although it felt more like an instruction than an option. I obeyed and watched her shimmy out of her dress. As I looked at her naked body, I thought to myself that she was definitely skinnier than Jessie and had smaller boobs and no glasses, but she still kinda looked like her anyways.

Then she came over and put a condom on my dick with her mouth and kept her mouth down there to get me hard, or at least hard enough, and then she climbed on top of me and slid her pussy down onto my dick. We fucked for a little while but all I could think about was how much she looked like Jessie and so I kept going soft and finally she just gave up. I apologized and blamed it on all the alcohol and drugs although by that time I was pretty sure they had worn off hours ago. She said it was okay and we could just lie together and talk.

She asked me where I was from, and I told her. She asked if I had a girlfriend back home, and I lied and said that her name was Jessica. She asked me what I was doing in town, and I told her that I was a reporter

and was going to interview Lady Gaga. She pretended to give a shit about my job and asked what other famous people I interviewed, and I made up a few unconvincing lies before she told me that our time was up and I had to go. As I walked out, she took a couple of twenties out of the envelope on the dresser and gave them back to me so I'd at least have cab fare.

I didn't notice until later that folded between the bills was another purple business card like the one the cab driver had given me.

---

Now she's moved me downstairs, put one of her wigs on me, and is making me play her piano. She's barking at me to write songs, to create spontaneously, to open up my mouth and my body and become a conduit for the music. She wants me to write an entire rock-opera on the spot. Whenever I play a bum note or hesitate too long or flub the second rhyme of a couplet, she swats me in the face with a fly-swatter to show her displeasure.

She's been swatting me a lot.

"When you make music or write or create, it's really your job to have mind-blowing, irresponsible, condomless sex with whatever idea it is you're writing about at the time."

"I can't, I'm shit, I have no talent," I whine. "I have nothing to say as an artist, I've never had a single unique or original thought in my entire pathetic life."

She swats me. That wasn't in key.

"Do you know what this says?" she asks, pointing to the tattoo on her arm.

"It's Rilke, right?"

She swats me.

"No, I don't know."

*"In the deepest hour of the night, confess to yourself that you would die if you were forbidden to write. And look deep into your heart where it spreads its roots, the answer, and ask yourself, must I write?"*

I let out an anguished cry, "I don't want to work that hard for my art. I just want to be adored. Even if I've done nothing to deserve it. I am human and I need to be loved just like everybody else."

I get another faceful of swatter.

"As artists, we are eternally heartbroken."

---

Cut to me alone in an elevator, not sure exactly what building the elevator's in or how I got there. I glanced down at my hand and noticed I was holding the purple card that Celeste had given me. It looked exactly like the one I got from the taxi driver, except it had the number 777 written on the back. Then I noticed that the button for the 7th floor was lit, so I figured that must have been where I was headed. When the elevator doors opened, I walked down the hallway until I found the room and then knocked on the door seven times long, seven times short, and then seven times long again. There was no answer, so after a few minutes I tried the door knob and it was unlocked so I just let myself in.

The door opened into a spacious loft apartment that looked like it'd been ripped from the world of Tron. There were the usual hallmarks of contemporary upper crust domesticity, like minimalist Scandinavian furniture with chrome accents and monochromatic upholstery, except everything was trimmed with glowing florescent tubes of red and blue. And it wasn't just the furniture, even the walls, the baseboards, the counter tops and cabinetry were outlined in the florescent tubes, all of which ran throughout the apartment in intricate criss-crossing patterns and converged in the middle of the room where they intertwined together to form a giant crucifix of neon lights.

I wandered from room to room, looking to see if anyone was home, but found no one. Then I walked up a spiral staircase that led to the master bedroom, where I heard a shower running through the closed bathroom door. I glanced back down at the card in my hand and figured that the protocol would be pretty much the same as before with Celeste. So I stripped off my clothes, laid down on the bed, and waited.

Five minutes later, the bathroom door opened, and out of a cloud of dense steam walked the Mother Monster herself. Lady Fucking Gaga. Skin still slick and scaly from the shower, her angular bone structure jutting against her pale flesh as she moved like some albino reptilian. She took one look at my naked ass lying on her bed, and bashed me over the head with the fiber optic Mary Magdalene statuette from her night stand.

---

She is sitting beside me, straddling the piano bench, her lips hovering mere millimeters from my right ear.

I laugh nervously.

"Sorry, I just remembered something funny," I lie.

"You know, sense memory is a powerful thing," she whispers. "I can give myself an orgasm just by thinking about it."

I shift uncomfortably on the bench, feeling the blood rushing to my cheeks and groin simultaneously.

"Do you want to fuck me?" she asks.

"I don't know. I both do and don't. I don't want to fuck you in any vulgar or profane sense, but I can't think of any other way to connect with you intimately, to consummate this moment in time that we are sharing."

She *thwaps* me in the face again with the flyswatter.

"Sexuality is half poison and half liberation. What's the line? I don't have a line."



The next morning I tag along with her as she gives interviews to promote the new album. I find it easy to blend into her entourage, to be just another face in the crowd, another cold and barren satellite orbiting her star.

I watch her shift uncomfortably in her seat as the pair of morning show hosts lob inane questions at her. They don't look human, they look like animated wax dummies, and their questions and awkward attempts at banter display about as much humanity as wax. Everything about her demeanor makes her seem genuinely uncomfortable with the attention—the nervous laughter, the clipped responses, the vaseline-toothed smile plastered onto her face that keeps veering over the line into a grimace. And to make matters worse, the skin-tight and barely-there vinyl skirt she's wearing won't stop riding up her thighs, so she keeps tugging it down and fussing with it. The overall impression is not of Lady Gaga, polished pop goddess, but instead of some normal random person who woke up one day in this ridiculous costume and was forced to fake her way through the role.

*She's just like us.* I think to myself. *She's just a regular human being after all with the same insecurities and awkwardness as the rest of us.*

That train of thought quickly leads to: *So why should she deserve to be famous? What makes her so much better than the rest of us?*

But that question is only a half-truth. What I really want to ask is: *What makes her so much better than me?*

The female host is asking Gaga about her exercise routine, or rather she keeps hinting she might ask about it but is too busy talk about her own age-defying diet and exercise system to actually get around to it. She's finally cut off by a lecherous remark from the male host about how all that working out really shows. He's old enough to be his partner's grandfather and makes no attempt to hide the plainly visible erection this gives him. Gaga takes the awkward pause that follows as an opening to finally talk about her own daily rehearsal and exercise routine, which is insanely disciplined and makes me self conscious of the fact that I don't even remember which floor my apartment building's exercise room is on. She then goes on to talk about how hard she's worked for her art and about the years she spent cutting her teeth doing shows in New York's club scene and the tireless hours of self-promotion it took to make it where she is today, and I'm thinking about the one demo tape my band managed to make in college and how there's still a box full of copies in my parents' garage that I'd always intended to take around to the local radio stations and record stores and clubs but never got around to. And then I think about the unfinished screenplay that's been sitting neglected on my hard drive for years.

And then I notice that Gaga's stopped talking and is staring apprehensively into the camera like a deer in the headlights because no one's asking her any more questions; the male host is too busy tugging away on his misshapen member while the female host sucks the blood out of a nineteen year old P.A. in a CUNY sweatshirt until his skin collapses in on himself like a deflated Capri Sun juice pouch.

The whole studio falls into a protracted hush. It lasts too long for anyone's comfort, until finally a young woman in the audience screams out, "I love you Gaga," and the rest of the crowd bursts into riotous applause.

Suddenly Gaga snaps out her petrified daze, and her eyes sparkle and her lips curl up into an ecstatic smile and she waves to her fans while gazing lovingly into the camera's adoring lens, and says, "I love my fans. Live your eyeliner, breathe your lipstick, and kill for each other."



Later, we are in the back seat of her limo, and she is stilling glowing from feeding on the positive psychic energies of a studioful of people who worship her like people in sandals used to worship golden calves.

I ask her, "How did you do it? How did you make it to the top?"

"I've always been famous," she answers, as if the question itself is absurd. "It's just everybody's just now finding out."

---

That night she does an in-store signing. The fans are all young and beautiful and insane, standing in line with telephones strapped to their heads, draped in slices of rancid meat and fishnet underwear and latex bodysuits, generally looking like refugees from a Broadway adaptation of *Beyond Thunderdome*.

"Live your eyeliner, breathe your lipstick, and kill for each other," she commands them.

"Live your eyeliner, breathe your lipstick, and kill for each other," they chant back in unison.

Fans start to pass out as they reach the front of the line and receive their autographed CD. A pair of stage hands drags them away like at an old time tent revival. The line snakes up and down every aisle of the store before going out the door, around the building, and then trailing off down the street.

"Live your eyeliner, breathe your lipstick, and kill for each other," the chanting continues.

Fans start speaking in tongues and throwing themselves on the ground in convulsions. People are losing bladder and bowel control left and right.

"Live your eyeliner, breathe your lipstick, and kill for each other."

A fourteen year old girl flings herself on top of the table in front of Gaga and starts to orgasm ecstatically like Bernini's Saint Teresa.

"Live your eyeliner, breathe your lipstick, and kill for each other."

All at once, twelve of the fans look down at their hands at the exact same moment and see bloody stigmata.

"Live your eyeliner, breathe your lipstick, and kill for each other."

A massive orgy breaks out in the Easy Listening aisle.

"Live your eyeliner, breathe your lipstick, and kill each other."

"Kill each other."

"Kill each other."

I feel sick, overwhelmed and claustrophobic, like the entire store is going to implode around me. So I stagger out the back door through the stock room and end up on the loading docks behind the building.

From inside, I can still hear the rapturous chanting.

"Kill each other."

---

I'm not sure exactly how much time passes after that.

I'm living on the streets now. Sometimes I find a place to sleep with a roof over my head, but sometimes I just sleep under a doorway or a bus shelter.

Sometimes people will give me a place to stay, or give me some money. Most of the time they expect something in return, but that's okay, it doesn't bother me. Nothing really bothers me these days, everything's just sorta numb.

I'm still blacking out. Often when I come to, I'm in a new city and I'm not sure how I got there. Sometimes I am dressed like a bum, sometimes I'm in drag, sometimes I'm wearing expensive tailored suits, and sometimes there's blood on my clothes but I don't seem to be cut or injured anywhere.

I haven't been back home at all. One time it occurred to me to call in and check my voicemail. There were a few messages from work. The last one said that if I didn't come in the next day, not to ever come back in at all. The machine said it was over a month old.

I have been back to New York, though, but not back to her. Sometimes I do come out of a blackout and find myself in front of that hotel by Central Park, the one with the globe where I met Celeste. I never go inside, I just stand out front and look up at it for long periods of time. I'm not sure why.

One day I found myself at a bus shelter, staring at an ad for the TV show *The Apprentice*. I had no way of knowing exactly how long I've been standing there, staring, but from the freaked-out expressions of everyone around me, I could safely guess it'd been a while.

A grizzled old man walks up and stands next to me. He looks like a teamster or longshoreman or some other suitably masculine profession that I could never do.

"I can't believe that joker might actually run for President," he says in disgust at the poster, then turns to look at me. "I sure as shit wouldn't vote for him, would you?"

I turn to look at him and notice that he bears a subtle resemblance to the cab driver who picked me up at Kennedy Airport.

"No sir."

"Damn straight you won't."

Then he whispers something to me, or at least it sounded like he did, even though I watch his lips the whole time and they didn't even seem to twitch. But anyways, he whispers, "Watch very closely as the magical angel and I are swallowed by the rainbow twister, and left stranded on the Glitter Way."

I turn back to look at the poster. Someone has drawn devil horns and a goatee on the face, along with a big 666 on his forehead. I focus on the preternatural orange quaff on top of the man's head in the photo, and in my mind's eye I picture it staying perfectly composed, not a single hair moving out of place, while the head it sits upon jerks back, and to the left.

Back, and to the left.

## No. 1

It starts the same way every time.

Zero seconds. It's the last day of our honeymoon. Sarah is standing on the *Champs-Élysées*, the sun setting behind the *Arc de Triomphe* in the distance, the early-evening foot traffic rushing past her in either direction. Sarah looks straight into the camera with that big, toothy grin of hers. The same grin that caught my eye when we first met. The grin that I used to say would always make me melt, no matter how many times I've seen it.

"Are you messing around with that stupid thing again?" she asks, trying to adopt her best sternly-nagging tone of voice, but that grin gets in the way.

Nine seconds. I zoom in tight on her face. She hides behind a cluster of overly-ornate shopping bags, her haul from an afternoon spent maxing out what little was left on our credit cards after a two-hundred-guest wedding and a pair of intercontinental plane tickets.

The camera zooms back out, and a figure appears in the background, emerging from a side street on the extreme right of the screen. She stands out from the rest of the bustling crowd immediately, her lithe figure looking statuesque and regal in a white summer dress.

Thirteen seconds.

Off-camera, I say, "Hey isn't that...?"

I zoom past Sarah, focusing in on this new figure. Sarah whips her head around to look, a motion that I barely catch in the blurry foreground before she completely disappears from view, crowded out by this new woman. The pop star.

Seventeen seconds.

She's wearing oversized sunglasses with dark brown lenses, and her long, platinum blonde hair keeps falling in front of her face, but it is unmistakably her. That face has gazed alluringly from magazine stands the world over, reproduced millions of times on everything from glossy fashion rags to pulpy gossip tabloids. Those full, pouty lips have been plastered on an infinite sea of CD covers, those lips that sculpt the notes with such melodic conviction that she makes even the most clumsily-suggestive lyrics seem somehow enticing.

But now she doesn't look glamorous or seductive, having dropped the well-practiced mask of her public persona. She looks raw, real, almost human.

I zoom in closer. She turns to look at the camera. I think she sees me. She's looking right at me. I zoom in closer, so close I don't see what she's doing with her hands, can't see what she's pulling out of her handbag until she lifts it into view and slides the muzzle into her mouth.

Twenty-three seconds.

The shot rings out loudly, even over the camera's weak microphone, and a burst of red explodes from the back of her head. For a split second she keeps looking at the camera, but then she collapses out of view, dropping to the ground.

The video goes chaotic. Screams and terrified cries overload the microphone, turning the audio into one garbled, distorted sonic shriek. The image shakes violently as I jog towards her, crossed haphazardly by the incoherent shapes of the panicked crowd surging in both directions - half running away to safety, the other half running closer for a better look.

I'm close enough that I can muscle my way to the front. Like a ghoul, I keep filming. I couldn't tell you why - I wasn't thinking clearly, just reacting, pure instinct. The image stabilizes and I am right on top of her, looking down at her strangely unchanged face. Her glasses have fallen off, exposing her still-open eyes as she looks straight up. Her hair is spread out across the sidewalk like rays from the rising sun over the horizon, and a puddle of blood crowns her like a halo from a medieval painting. I zoom in closer on her eyes, which still seem so vivid and alive, still look like they're staring straight at me. A strange sensation comes over me, like for just a moment I forget that she's dead, for just a moment it feels like she can still see me, like she's caught me spying on her deeply private moment, and I feel a brief but intense pang of guilt. I shut the camera off.

Thirty-three seconds. The video ends, the image on my computer screen freezes on that last frame, an extreme close-up of her eyes.

---

I heard the door creak open behind me, so I quickly jerked the mouse over to close the video player window, revealing the wallpaper photo of Sarah and me at the altar.

"Ready to go?"

Sarah poked her head into the study. I clicked around a couple more times to shut down the computer, grumbling some weak noise about how I was just checking my e-mail while waiting for her to get ready. Before powering off, the screen lingered on the desktop picture for a few

extra seconds, and I realized that I'd looked at that photo so many times that it had become virtually meaningless. Just a random collection of red, blue, and green pixels, unable to elicit any kind of emotional response. I felt like a dead nerve fried out by persistent overstimulation.

Sarah stopped me at the door to straighten my tie and fix my collar. She furrowed her brow and let the corners of her mouth droop, passive-aggressively telegraphing her displeasure with my wardrobe.

We were meeting her brother Alex for dinner. It was our first time seeing him since the wedding, and she had attired herself immaculately in a form-fitting draped cocktail dress of red silk, her short auburn hair carefully styled in homage to Audrey Hepburn in *Sabrina*. She hadn't dressed this nice since the honeymoon, and somehow this realization stirred a tinge of resentment within me.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "You seem distracted."

"Nothing," I replied dismissively as I coiled my arms around her and pulled her in close enough to smell the sweet vanilla scent of her perfume, trying my best to ignore the subtle way she flinched at my touch. "Let's go eat."

Together, we walked carefully through the hallway, treading over the clear plastic tarp that covered the bare floor. We passed the dining room, which was empty and similarly covered in plastic sheets, and the kitchen, which was savagely gutted and covered with plastic sheets, and finally the family room, which had been crammed full of all the contents that had formerly been in the kitchen and dining room, and *then* covered with plastic sheets.

The remodeling began right after the honeymoon. We bought the house brand new when we got engaged, so there wasn't much that desperately needed to be done. Just a few quick tweaks, it was supposed to take no more than a month or two. That was one year and two loans ago.

"Where are we meeting him?" I asked as I scooped my keys and wallet off the small table by the front door.

"Petalouída's."

I stopped in my tracks. "Babe, you know we can't afford to go places like that now."

"I know," she protested. "But Alex wants to go there, and he said he'd treat."

I grimaced. "You know I don't like it when Alex pays for everything." She sighed, "Yeah, I know." But she was already out the door.

---

I watched it the first time while uploading the honeymoon videos from the Flip onto my computer. Sarah had gone straight to sleep after the airport shuttle dropped us off, but I was forcing myself to stay awake until after dark, hoping that it would reset my internal clock.

Up until that point I'd been telling myself that I would delete the video, but I decided to give it just one look before I did, one time to satisfy my curiosity before consigning it to digital oblivion.

So I clicked play and let it run. Thirty-three seconds. Hardly any time at all. And yet, for some reason, time seemed to stand still. I still don't know what about it mesmerized me - I was never a fan of her music, nor was I particularly attracted to her. That platinum-blonde-glamor-queen type never did much for me. I also, up to that point, didn't consider myself to be morbid or obsessed with death. Horror movies, goth music, *Faces of Death*, none of it was really my thing. But somehow this was different. This didn't feel macabre or depressing. There was something beautiful about it - deeply, ineffably beautiful.

I let the video run out and then closed the player. I did not delete the file.

I watched it only occasionally over the next couple of weeks. Always at home on my computer, always either early in the morning or late at night while Sarah was asleep. I didn't think she knew I was watching it or that I still even had it saved. We never talked about what happened after that day; I think she was in too much shock at first, and she always made me change the channel whenever something about the pop star came on the news. Then after we got home, it just never came up.

Gradually, I started watching it more and more. The mistake was loading it on my iPhone so I could watch it at work. I snuck away with increasing regularity to lock myself in a supply closet or bathroom stall and watch it with the volume turned down. Sometimes I'd even watch right at my desk when I had to work late, after everyone else had gone home.

I became obsessed with it. I couldn't stop thinking about it. Stopped at a traffic light, I'd picture the pop star walking around the corner, coming into view just in time for me to see her put the gun in her mouth and pull the trigger.

What's more, I also started realizing that, inexplicably, I was falling in love with her. There was something about the intimacy of seeing her face

as she steeled herself for what she was about to do, absorbed in an intensely personal moment, and then seconds later looking up to see me filming it. The more I watched it, the more I saw a change happen in that instant, like a switch being thrown as her facial expression went from anger at me for intruding on her privacy and instead took on an uncanny calmness, like a moment of clarity. I began to imagine that up until that moment she hadn't yet firmly made up her mind about what she was doing and that somehow me filming her helped her decide, and she was grateful for it.

Whether it was all in my head or not, I felt a connection with her, and it was like my brain didn't know how to interpret that connection other than make it romantic. I started downloading her songs and went on Wikipedia to read about her life. I googled pictures of her. I saved it all in the same folder as the video, one I kept hidden in an obscure corner of my hard drive where Sarah wouldn't stumble on it, like my digital shrine to her.

I don't remember when watching the video went from romantic to sexual, but I do remember the first time I masturbated to it. Sarah and I weren't having sex much since the honeymoon. She threw herself obsessively into the remodeling to the point where it became her full-time job. Meanwhile, I was pulling long hours at the office, picking up the slack created by a run of lay-offs and trying to make myself as valuable and therefore difficult to down-size as possible. Our rapidly-mounting debt and the tension it created between us didn't help matters either.

So one night when she spurned my advances and left me feeling frustrated and restless and unbelievably horny, I staggered off to my computer to find something to help me relieve myself. Instead of opening porn, though, I played the video - without thinking, almost by instinct. I put it on a loop, and for the first three or four times it repeated I just sat there, staring intently at the screen, watching her, imaging what it would feel like to touch her skin, to caress her body, to taste her lips. Eventually, I slipped my hand into my boxers and gripped my cock, which was so hard and swollen it hurt. I jerked off quickly and aggressively, grunting as I climaxed, exploding inside my shorts at the exact moment that the bullet ripped through the back of her skull.

When I was done, I felt so dirty and disgusted with myself that I actually deleted the file from my computer. The next morning, though, I realized I still had it on my phone. Still, I told myself I would delete that, too. Later that day, though, I convinced myself that I didn't have to delete, I would just stop watching it - as a show of my willpower or some

bullshit. When that didn't happen, I settled for seeing how long I could go between viewings, turning it into a game.

My record was two days, nine hours, forty-two minutes.

---

"What have I been up to? Let's see... backpacking across New Zealand, yachting and diving in Phuket, exploring Machu Pichu, skiing in the Swiss Alps, crab fishing in Alaska. You know, same old same old."

I looked down at the steak knife in my hand and fought the urge to jam it into my ear.

I never really got along with Alex. There was just something about him that rubbed me the wrong way. He always struck me as too loud, too crass, too obvious. Five years ago, he sold his start-up to eBay and made some savvy investments with the windfall, so that now he was essentially just living off his dividends.

At times it was hard to believe that he and Sarah even came from the same parents. She was like his photographic negative. Whereas his was the kind of personality that instantly dominated any room he entered, she always seemed to be almost devoid of any personality, an empty canvas, as if a childhood spent being constantly overshadowed had stunted her development. She was like the undergrowth beneath a majestic redwood - you'd never even notice she was there until you tripped over her.

I glanced at Sarah, who was hanging on her brother's every word with rapt attention, laughing at all the right moments, speaking only when strategically timed to spur him to continue elaborating and embellishing his stories.

I shifted my gaze from her, to Alex and that broad oafish grin stretched grotesquely across his face, and then finally to Alex's date, Vanessa. Unlike Sarah, she didn't seem too engrossed in Alex's escapades, nor was she shy about showing her boredom. She hadn't said more than two words the entire dinner and instead occupied herself with staring off into space with practiced indifference and pounding glass after glass of expensive Sherry.

I liked her.

I was fairly sure this wasn't the same girl he brought to the wedding. She had a goth or emo style - layered black hair with bleached platinum streaks, thick eyeliner, dark lipstick, big silver hoops through her eyebrow, nose, and lip. Her face wouldn't otherwise be considered

strikingly beautiful - her features seemed somehow off in their proportions - but she was the type who used her unconventional style to her advantage, transforming her flaws into alluringly exotic idiosyncrasies.

When she and Alex had stood to greet us, I noticed that she was wearing an open-back dress to show off her tattoos - a dozen or so butterflies that cascaded down her spine from her right shoulder blade all the way to the small of her back.

Now that dinner was winding down, she took another large gulp of Sherry, finishing off the glass, and caught me staring at her. I found there are typically two reactions people have to this kind of accidental eye-contact - either look away abruptly, or else smile or nod in polite acknowledgement before casually letting your eyes drift off. She did neither, instead meeting my gaze, letting our eyes lock, daring me to look away.

I finally did, glancing down to her hands. She was wearing black silk opera gloves that reached up to her mid-bicep, and she hadn't bothered to take them off for dinner.

Suddenly I felt a hand on mine and then jerked my head sideways. Sarah's gaze had followed mine to Vanessa's gloves, and she had locked our hands together on top of the table.

"So anyways, how was the honeymoon? You were in Paris around the same time that singer offed herself, what's her name—?"

"Yes," Sarah answered her brother. "In fact, we were right there when it happened. We even got it on video."

"No shitting?" Alex marveled. "Do you still have it?"

Sarah looked to me and chirped, "I'm sure you do, right?"

I opened my mouth but my jaw went slack, words failing me as I felt the warm blood glowing in my cheeks. I knew it was completely irrational, but somehow having the video discussed so openly felt like I had been caught with my pants down, like having my porn stash discovered between the box spring and the mattress when I was a teenager.

"Yeah," I finally squeaked, half choking on the word.

"Why didn't you sell it? You probably could've made a fortune off of TMZ or something." Alex asked incredulously. "She was the biggest singer in the world, every one of her songs was an instant chart-topper. You could've called the video *Number One with a Bullet* or some shit. It would be legendary."

"I don't know," I shrugged, keeping my eyes downcast. "I guess it just seemed in poor taste."

I hazarded a look up at Vanessa, whose wide eyes sparkled with genuine interest for the first time that night.

"I think that's cool," she said. "Why does every single moment of our lives have to immediately get put on YouTube? Some things are meant to be personal, to be private, otherwise they're not as special."

"Whatever," Alex snorted, shaking his head at me. "You could've made bank, just sayin'. That mortgage of yours isn't gonna pay itself."

I looked from him to Vanessa, who winked at me conspiratorially, as if saying she understood even if he couldn't, and then finally over to Sarah, who was absent-mindedly drawing shapes with a knife in the sauce on her plate, a subtle, bitter grin fixed on her lips.



It started the next morning at work.

I spotted her getting into an elevator on my floor just as I was coming back from our weekly staff meeting. I was too far away to catch her attention without causing a scene, but it was unmistakably her.

"You just missed your eleven o'clock," said my secretary Anita when I reached my office. "Dark haired woman. I think she said her name was Vanessa. Left this for you."

She passed me a business card across the reception counter. It was from one of the motels down the street and had a hand-written message on the back:

*I want to see it. Come during your lunch. Room 213.*

*The motel room door was propped open when I arrived. Inside, the room was completely dark except for the light emanating from the blank blue TV screen.*

When I found her sitting on the edge of the bed, I stopped dead in surprise and stared at her slack-jawed from across the room.

*She said her name was Vanessa, Anita had said. I had to smile.*

She leaning back casually, propped up on her elbows, dressed in a short black dress, striped thigh-high stockings, and the same full-length gloves from last night.

Her black-painted lips twisted into a wry grin as she brushed back a few strands of raven hair from her face.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" she purred. "Put it on."

Using the cable I'd brought from my office, I hooked my phone up to the TV. My joints felt wooden, my fingers awkward and clumsy, my skin tingled with the excitement of indulging a guilty pleasure. Watching the

video with another person - especially her - made me feel naked and vulnerable.

I hit play and joined her on the bed. The light from the screen reflected off her pale skin, causing the colors and shadow to dance across her face. She watched silently with rapt attention, her eyes growing wider as the gun came into the frame and slid inside the pop star's mouth. Her lips parted slightly when the gun went off, just enough to let out a small, barely audible gasp.

The screen froze on the last frame, the pop singer's dead eyes staring out at us.

"Again."

I set the video to repeat. She grabbed my wrist roughly and guided my hand onto her thigh, sliding it up under her dress, slowly, teasingly, until finally I felt the bare, freshly-shaved flesh between her legs.

My eyes locked on her. Hers stayed locked on the screen. I glided my fingers into her and began to slide them back and forth in a firm, steady rhythm.

Meanwhile, the video kept playing with its own weird, cyclical syncopation - quiet calm at first, zooming in, tension building, then the gun, then the shot, then the chaos. Repeat.

Calm. Zoom. Gun. Chaos.

Calm. Zoom. Gun. Chaos.

She bucked her hips and crooned a series of breathy staccato moans, each slightly louder than the last, growing in intensity until finally she began to climax.

She snapped her head back and thrust her pelvis forward, and I felt her body tremble against mine. When she was done, she collapsed gently against me, laying her head on my shoulder so that her warm, heavy breathing tickled behind my ear.

I wasn't really sure what to do next - or if I should even do or say anything at all. So I sat there motionless on the edge of the bed, staring stupidly at the TV screen.

Once she regained her composure, she stood up, threw on a long black coat, and left without a word.

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We met regularly after that, usually once or twice a week. It started the same way every time - a note with a motel address and room number. Sometimes I'd find it in my office or tucked under my car's windshield

wiper, sometimes under the check at lunch or tucked into the outer pocket of my laptop case. I never saw her leave them, but paradoxically, I started seeing her everywhere, imagining every dark feminine shape in my peripheral vision to be her. Then I'd turn my head and she would disappear or change back into some random stranger, only ever existing as fleeting glimpses, suspended always just at the hazy edges of perception.

Even when I was with her, she seemed just as insubstantial. We could only ever connect intimately while the video played. It was like a magic spell that was broken whenever I pressed *Stop*, a bright flame that burned intensely for an instant and then was gone.

When it was over, she wasted no time in getting dressed and getting out. Pillow talk was out of the question. A couple times I insisted that she stay and lay beside me. She acquiesced but hardly made any effort to humor me, remaining stiff as a board as I tried to cuddle against her. Eventually her coldness and unresponsiveness would put me off completely, and I'd just give up and leave.

Once, more out of morbid curiosity than anything else, I tried to skip the video entirely and jumped straight into kissing and groping her. Just to see what happened. She shoved me off unceremoniously and looked at me like I'd just betrayed her, like I'd violated some sacred vow, some tacit understanding that existed between us.

I eventually just resigned myself to an emotionless relationship consisting solely of kinky, no-strings-attached motel room sex - which, once I put it like that, wasn't so hard after all.

Unfortunately, things with Sarah weren't nearly as straightforward. Every day she seemed to become even more aloof and withdrawn, completely immersing herself into the remodeling. She started treating our home like a sketch pad, a rough draft, upon which she could pursue any passing fancy exhaustively, just to see if she'd like it, and then casually tear it apart and start over again. She had hardwood floors installed, torn out, replaced with carpet, torn up again, and then replaced with darker hardwood floors. She started designing extensions to the house, having architects draw up blue prints for a whole new wing that we could never afford to build, even while our kitchen had sat unfinished and unusable for over nine months.

I was vaguely aware of her deteriorating health. She hardly ever ate, slept even less, and her face was perpetually wracked by nervous tension to the point that I thought she might've been making herself physically sick, psychosomatically, like there was something eating away at her

from the inside. I never got around to asking what was wrong with her. I always meant to, but I never had the fucking energy.

We hardly ever even spoke, let alone touched each other, and what few conversations we had invariably started off being about the house and ended in a bitter battle over our finances.

One night, after an argument had turned particularly sour, I stormed off and went for a drive just to cool off. When I came home, there was a note on the door from Sarah saying she needed some space and had gone to stay with her parents for the weekend.

I shrugged, went inside, and headed for bed.

As I walked down the hallway, however, I noticed a light flickering under the closed door to my study.

I found her waiting for me inside, sitting in my desk chair and completely naked but for those ever-present gloves. She had hooked up the computer to my video projector, and the video was playing on the opposite wall, blown up larger than life.

The pop star was pulling the trigger just as I walked in. Twenty-three seconds.

She stood up and crossed the room towards me, her right arms outstretched, a pair of metal handcuffs dangling loosely from her index finger.

Before I knew what was happening she was on top of me, kissing my mouth and neck hungrily, ravenously. Her legs wrapped around my waist and I arched backwards to support her weight, then carried her into the bedroom. I threw her onto the bed and pounced on her, her sense of urgency and abandon having spread infectiously, whipping me into a frenzy of blind passion.

When we had finally worn each other out, I collapsed beside her, my muscles burning with exhaustion, my skin hot and sticky and grimy with sweat. She was still cuffed to the headboard, turned over on her belly with her back to me.

I slid in close, pressing my flesh firmly against hers, fitting our bodies together like puzzle pieces and gently draping my arms around her.

"I guess you're wanting me to stick around," she said while rattling the handcuffs.

I didn't reply, but instead leaned in to plant a series of gentle kisses along the back of her neck. Then I slowly dragged my fingers down her back, gingerly tracing the soft curve of her spine. She shuddered, goosebumps appearing on her pallid skin.

I ran my fingers back up, jumping my index and middle fingers alternately from one butterfly tattoo to another, like frogs hopping across lily pads.

Each of the butterflies was unique in its pose and size, but their wings were all the same colors - vibrant yellow with thick black veins and orange tips.

"They're Common Jezebels," she said.

"What? The butterflies?"

"Yes."

I snorted.

"Really, that's what they're called," she insisted. "Common Jezebels, *delias eucharis* "

"Eucharist?"

" *Eucharis* . No t ." She shifted her around uncomfortably, trying to keep the blood flowing despite her awkward position. "I suppose it's the same general principal, though. Chrysalis. Transubstantiation. Transformation. Turning something common or ugly into something beautiful."

"Is that why you got them?" I asked. "Because you think of yourself as ugly? Because you think they will make you beautiful?"

She clicked a safety release on the handcuffs, sat up, rubbed her raw wrists through the gloves, and then left.



Sarah came home a few days later. There were no apologies from either side, no real acknowledgment that there had even been a fight. I just came home one day and she was there, just as she'd always been before, just as I assumed she always would be.

To an outside observer, it might have looked like things settled back to normal. There was something different though, something that I couldn't quite put my finger on at first. Then it dawned on me - we weren't fighting anymore. And since we weren't fighting, in effect we weren't speaking at all. It started feeling like we were two lodgers who happened to live in the same house, only marginally aware of the other's existence, taking pains not to bump into each other too much.

The more detached Sarah became, the more intense things got with Vanessa. The handcuffs had just been the tip of the iceberg. Soon there were candles, whips, gags, toys, costumes. And it wasn't just the props; the sex itself was getting rougher, darker. I'd be sore for days after

encounters, and every time I caught sight of myself in the mirror after showering, I'd discover some new set of bruises, bite marks, or scratches.

One day I walked into the motel room to find her dressed like the pop star from one of her early videos, wearing a long platinum blonde wig, a zebra print dress, and a blue lightning bolt painted under her eye. The only thing that didn't quite fit, of course, were her gloves.

As she led me to the bed, she quietly sang a lyric from the song. I couldn't help but let out a chuckle.

"Why do you laugh?" she asked. "This is really what this is all about, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?" I replied, perhaps a bit more defensively than I'd like to admit.

"Please," she intoned reproachfully. "Are you really going to pretend that you've never fantasized about fucking her?"

She pushed me down to sit on the edge of the bed, then dropped to her knees between my legs. Casting a quick glance over her shoulder at the video looping on the TV, she added, "I bet you've jacked off to this before. There's something subliminally erotic about it, isn't there? That's part of the appeal. The way she wraps her lips around that gun, like sucking a cock."

She unzipped my pants and took me into her mouth, and it hardly took any time for me to come. I gripped her head and pulled down, my fingers tugging the blonde wig slightly askew as my body twitched uncontrollably and I felt myself getting ready to explode.

Bam!

Twenty-three seconds.

She pulled her hair back and wiped her lips with the back of her gloved hand. "Careful, tiger," she purred as she fixed the wig. "Wouldn't want to ruin the illusion."

"It is a good costume," I conceded. "But something doesn't quite fit."

I reached out and grabbed her arm, then started sliding off the glove. She didn't protest, but just glowered at me darkly. I took the other one off, too, and then looked down at her bare forearms and the intricate webbing of jagged red scars carved into them.

"Isn't the goth cutter chick a bit of a cliché?"

"Fuck you," she spat and stood to leave.

Once again, I gripped her arm. She hesitated, turned to look at me, and smiled.

Suddenly we were back on the bed, ensnared in each other. I tugged my pants the rest of the way down and started hiking up her dress, but then suddenly paused, startled by what I found.

Strapped to her right thigh was a holster with a snubnosed .38.

She laughed in mischievous delight, savoring the expression on my face. Then she pulled out the revolver and traced it seductively across her chest.

“What’s the matter, don’t you find girls with guns sexy?”

I pulled back slightly like I was going to get off of her, and she quickly lifted the revolver and pressed its muzzle into my chest.

“That thing better not be loaded.”

She shrugged her shoulders, then with a giggle, cocked the hammer.

I held my breath.

She pulled the trigger.

Bam!

Behind me, the pop star’s brains exploded out of the back of her head.

Twenty-three seconds.

I quickly got up and left, ignoring her mischievous cackling as it followed me to the door.

I went back to work that afternoon unable to shake the feeling that we’d turned a corner somehow, that whatever was going on between us had just become a lot darker and decidedly unhealthy. Or perhaps it always had been, but now we were past the point where I couldn’t continue denying it to myself. Either way, I had an ominous feeling that things were about to start falling apart.

Luckily I didn’t have anything to do that afternoon that required much focus. The rest of the day was dominated by a marketing strategy meeting, and I spent most of the time picturing everyone else at the conference table taking out guns and blowing their brains out, one after another in a neat little circle, like dominoes.

Two days later, though, the knot I’d felt twisting in my stomach turned out to be unsettlingly prescient.

As I came into the house, I could hear Sarah’s voice coming from the room that had once been - but was still not quite restored as - our family room. Normally I’d have assumed she was talking to the contractors, but her voice was different - cheerier, more animated. I wandered in that direction, intending to just poke my head in while looking as aimless as possible, when a second woman’s voice joined in.

When I rounded the corner and saw the two of them together, my blood chilled.

Sarah and Vanessa sat on the floor, a notepad and an array of bridal magazines spread out on the coffee table between them. Sarah was wearing a long-sleeved v-neck and a pair of jeans, while Vanessa wore a tank top and a sari over a pair of jeans and a huge fucking rock sparkling on her left ring finger. Both of them beamed at me with diabolical glee.

I choked out some weak, perfunctory congratulations, then nodded politely and pretended to give a shit while they filled me in on their preliminary plans for the big day. As much as I tried not to, my eyes kept returning to Vanessa's ring and from there drifted up to her bare, unblemished forearm. I looked away quickly, and Sarah's gaze caught mine. She broke our eye contact after only a few seconds, turning away and tugging absently on the cuffs of her sleeves, making sure they stayed pulled down all the way.

The next afternoon I was sprawled naked on another motel bed. She was earnestly tugging on my flaccid cock to no avail. I sighed loudly, starting to get a crick in my neck, and turned away from her.

"What's wrong?" she said with the challenging tone of someone spoiling for a fight.

I didn't answer.

"Is this about the wedding?"

Silence.

"What? So now you're just gonna mope around because this delicate little fantasy you've dreamed up is starting to crack?"

"No," I finally replied, then stood up. "It's just, how can she... you be marrying Alex? I mean, how can you love him if you're fucking me?"

She paused and, for the briefest of moments, looked hurt, like I'd just slapped her. "Well you're fucking me, right? Does that mean you don't love your wife?"

I got dressed in silence, keeping my back to her so as not to see the searing look of righteous indignation I could feel making the skin crawl on the back of my neck.

I had finished and already started for the door when she got her last word.

"Anyway, it's only a matter of time before you get tired of me, too," she said accusingly, each word ringing loudly like a slug exploding out of a chamber. "After all, you got bored with Sarah pretty fast."

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I didn't see her for several weeks after that.

Actually, that's not strictly true; in a way, of course I saw her all the time. Sarah put the remodeling on indefinite hiatus and left the house frozen in mid-metamorphosis in order to help with the wedding preparations, and Vanessa started coming around daily. But I only ever saw the two of them in passing while I drifted through the house like a phantom and the girls would just keep chattering on, willfully oblivious to my presence.

There were no more notes, no more motel rooms.

To add insult to injury, the more time the two girls spent together, the more frequently my path inevitably crossed Alex's.

Every once in a while he strong-armed me into going out for beers, always insisting on paying, just to rub his money in my face. Mercifully, he didn't talk much; we'd usually just kick back in the bar and watch the Giants.

One night, though, I could tell he had something on his mind. He kept trying awkwardly to make small talk, taking tentative stabs at various conversation-starters in the distinctive manner of a typical closed-off alpha-male who has something serious to talk about but is absolutely fucking terrified of talking about anything serious, *ever*.

"So how's my sister been?" he ventured, desperately keeping his gaze averted from me and busying himself with methodically peeling the label off his bottle of Anchor Steam.

"She's fine," I replied, resolving to make this as difficult as possible for him in hopes that he'd just give up.

"She's been looking pretty rough around the edges, lately," he continued. "Is everything alright between you?"

"She's fine," I repeated. Then, after a couple nervous sips at my beer, I added, "She's just been going nuts over the house - the remodeling. She does one room, changes her mind, has it ripped apart, tries again, changes her mind again, rips it apart and then moves onto something else. It's like we're living in a perpetual construction site. It's impossible to live like that, not to mention the strain its putting on our budget."

He nodded sympathetically. "Yeah, just don't be too hard on her. It's different for chicks than it is for us. We're raised to go out hunting and exploring. They're raised to create homes. I mean, look at the toys we played with as kids. They had doll houses and Easy-Bake Ovens and dreamed of being princesses living in castles, while we had guns and swords and dreamed of traveling to galaxies far, far away in search of action and adventure." He paused, then added pointedly, "That's why we cheat so much, you know."

I sucked on my teeth dismissively. "That doesn't sound very enlightened of you. You should've seen some of the girls I grew up with; they could play cowboys and Storm Troopers with the best of them."

"I'm not saying it's right," he countered. "I'm not even saying it's natural. I'm sure it has as much to do with conditioning as biology. It just is what it is."

I shrugged. "Okay, whatever, so what's the fucking point?"

He slumped in his seat, having finally succeeded at completely removing his beer bottle label and staring at it perplexedly, as if thinking, *Now what am I supposed to do with this?*

"I'm just worried about my sister, is all. You know how she gets. I know how she gets. When we were teenagers, she went through a couple really bad patches. She stopped eating, stopped talking to people, started withdrawing into her own little world, staying locked up in her room like wrapping herself up in a cocoon. That's when she started with the therapy and taking her pills. Those were pretty tough times, there were a few scares - well, I don't have to explain it all to you, you've heard the stories. Anyways, the point is just that my sister is a wonderful girl, very special, but in a lot of ways she's also very fragile. I just hope you're being careful with her."



She came to see me one last time.

On the last night, it started with a bad dream that woke me up at around 2 am. I wandered out to the kitchen for a glass of water and found her waiting in the living room. It was dark and empty and covered in plastic, lit only by the moonlight through the large curtainless window. She stood in the center of the room, nude and wrapped loosely in one of the clear plastic tarps. The pale blue moonlight imbued the tarp with an ethereal glow, like a fiber optic cocoon.

I walked up to her and began to slowly unwrap her. She bit her lower lip playfully while spinning around, letting the plastic shed off her. When she was finally completely bare, I noticed with surprise how much weight she had lost over the past few weeks. Her body looked spindly and frail. I also saw that her arms had fresh scars carved into them, a few of which were still wet.

Then I saw something in her hands, something that shined as it caught the moonlight. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I realized it was the Flip.

Within seconds we were on the floor, our bodies writhing together passionately atop the crinkly plastic. She held the camera up to film us kissing as I ran my fingers through her long raven locks and tugged hard.

"Careful, tiger," she giggled playfully as she reached up and straightened out her dark hair. "Wouldn't want to ruin the illusion."

That night was different than the other times. We savored the topography of each other's bodies like we were exploring undiscovered land. It reminded me of how it had been with Sarah when we first started dating - exciting and urgent and new. There was the sensation of melting into another person, melding your flesh, moving as one.

I fell asleep after we finished, and when I opened my eyes, it was Sarah I saw sitting in the far corner, naked with her back against the wall and her knees bent up to hold her legs close against her body. She was clutching something shiny in her right hand. At first I thought it was the camera, but then I realized I was holding that.

I raised the camera out in front of me until I could see her framed within the screen. She was mostly hidden in shadow, but the glossy red lacerations that crisscrossed her forearms stood out vibrantly in the moonlight.

I started recording.

Zero seconds.

"I'm sorry," I said. I wasn't sure if I really meant it, but it seemed like the thing I was supposed to say, like lines in a script.

She flashed me a smile like the Mona Lisa's, full of reproach and indulgence. It was the kind of smile a mother would have for her disingenuously-penitent child, the kind that said, *Who are you trying to fool?*

Nine seconds.

"You don't have to be," Sarah said. "You wanted to fuck someone else, and I wanted to be someone else. It made sense at first, but now I realize it'll never work. Because no matter who I become, you're *always* gonna want to fuck someone else, and I'll *always* want to be someone else."

I felt like I should defend myself somehow. But for once, mercifully, I had the good sense to keep my fucking mouth shut.

Seventeen seconds.

"In a funny way, it's comforting," she said, "to know that no matter what else happens in the rest of your life, at least I'll always be your first. Your number one."

Twenty-three seconds.

She lifted the gun to her head and pulled the trigger.

## About These Stories

Two of these stories were written for the zizekpress.com blog, which consists largely of absurdist satire about celebrities and pop culture. The third was intended for an unrelated anthology project that fell apart, and while it is much darker and more personal in tone, it nonetheless shares a number of thematic elements with the other pieces.

This should go without saying, but any celebrities appearing, mentioned, or even hinted at in these stories are depicted for purposes of parody and are in no way intended to represent anything even remotely resembling actual reality. No endorsements are implied or intended. Similarly, the lyrics and dialog attributed to Lady Gaga in Gagapocalypse are mostly actual quotes that have been excerpted and re-contexted for satirical purposes as fair use.

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June 2011  
San Jose, California  
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## About Zizek Press

**Writing in a new voice is hard, but we must try.**

When not putting words into celebrities' mouths, the fine folks at Zizek Press also find time to write some seriously kick-ass books, ranging from sci-fi to pulp to literary fiction to satire.

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#### **Tokyo Zero :: Available at Feedbooks**

One man goes to Tokyo to end the world. It goes fairly well.

As a Japanese cult gets ready to stage a massive attack, they are forced to recruit a secretive young bio-chemist from the West. They hide out on the fringes of Tokyo, taking care of the daily business of preparing for the apocalypse, until the foreigner's secret past starts to come to light and threaten their future dreams.

#### **Automatic Assassin (Coming Soon)**

As usual Xolo got the mail and went to a man-made planet to kill someone.

Unfortunately there were these kids and he got sentimental and soon he had a bomb in his head that was falling in love with him and he had to go back down the old genocide hole to Earth and find out who was the king there and why he was irritating important people with space yachts.

*"Like Dune written by Douglas Adams and proofread by Hunter S Thomson." (Hypothetical reviewer)*

### **Lenox Parker**

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Hollywood legend Howard Kessler is washed up after a series of sordid, drunken mistakes, and returns to his Brooklyn roots after decades of success. What he finds is not the nostalgia he expected, but a group of hardened guys with grudges to match. The gang all finally meet up at a dive in Chinatown, but instead of a warm reunion the deep resentments of the past turn into exploitation and deceit.

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## Stavrogin

### Charcoal

Hong Kong, present day: A man teaches children, has sex with a seventeen year old girl, and thinks himself into a dark, dark hole.

Only the recent suicide of a Korean model can pull him out.

*"It's David Lynch in a hotel room with the brain of Camus guarded by Kubrick and analysed via satellite TV by Pedro Almodovar."* – Robert Patrick, 'T-1000' from 'Terminator 2: Judgment Day.'

### Hollywood on the edge of forever

Why is Tom Cruise wandering around the deserted basement of a movie studio? What is Christian Slater doing in the sewers with a fake shotgun? Why is Nick Nolte killing Russians? What is this movie called 'Statham's Brain'?

And the big one...Did Jack Nicholson really survive 'The Shining'?

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When thirteen year old Matt took a cinder block to his playmate Hannah's legs, he never knew things would end like they did. Years later, after he is released from a secure psychiatric facility, he is sadistically drawn to Hannah again but finds himself trying to protect her from the other disturbed individuals that gather around her.

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A young woman searches for her missing twin sister in a foreign country called America. On the road, she encounters a series of strangers who help her navigate its topography, including a cowboy in a pink Cadillac, a sadistic law enforcement agent, a pulp fiction novelist, the regulars at a nuclear bomb-themed dive bar, and a man who befriends mannequins.

*1999 (2009)*

It's New Year's Eve, and four teenage friends are waiting for the world to end.

*Home Movie (2009)*

When a customer returns his own home movie inside a rented DVD case, an obsessive porn store clerk soon finds herself plunged into an old-fashioned whodunnit.

*Fake (2009)*

A desperate journalist tries to make his girlfriend understand why he is guilty of orchestrating an elaborate hoax... and how, when he met a mysterious musician with an amazing gift, it seemed that his lies might be coming true.

*Concrete Underground (2010)*

An idealistic journalist sets out to expose corruption among the city's elite and soon finds himself immersed in a conspiracy of murder, blackmail, espionage, and human trafficking. Pitted against the enigmatic CEO of one of the world's largest tech companies, he must play a deadly game threatens to unearth its players' darkest secrets.

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