

L u s t e r

It wasn't easy simultaneously mending six billion broken hearts, but I managed.

That is the first line of the book that I am going to write someday. It will be the best book ever, based on my life story, wiser than all tabloids and sexier than the Bible. Oprah will approve.

This very bedroom will be blocked off by velvet ropes, and the carpet stains will become collector's items sold on eBay. And when they who hail from where the phone books are thicker see my humble origins, they'll all be thinking the same thought:

"How is it that while cell phones were ringing show tunes, while anxiety disorders were going airborne, while the world was getting so heavy that gravity got redundant, there existed a malnourished boy slashing out such valuable, world-changing thoughts that would later become our anthems, jotting out a revolution per minute in spiral notebooks on a maggot-filled bed in a musty bedroom in a grotesque home on an illiterate street in an incestuous town in such a sad, sad state?"

I ask myself the same question with the answer hovering behind me reeking of malt liquor and marijuana. He's forcing some greatness out of me, this man, this horribly average humanoid.

He taunts me. "You're so smart, you know whum

sayin. Then write me one of your stupid songs, you smart-ass, bitch-ass bitch.”

With his big gun pressed against the back of my mind, he inspires me. And so I spit out some lyrics as he cocks the gun like the true Neanderthal he is.

II. That's What They All Say

O p a l

You hear people talking about wavelengths. I reckon I have one of those wavelengths that's hard to pick up on. Maybe I'm still on AM or something. I don't know. But there are a few hearing me, like this one I got in the passenger's seat spitting hawkers at the pedestrians. They think she's cute 'til they have a wad of her venom running down the side of their face. Then she's not so much cute as she is disgusting. I think they feel the same way about me.

I am ten times as old as Ember, but we're still on about the same level. Either she's really mature, or I'm really immature. I don't know. I guess the biggest difference between us (besides the seventy-two years) is that I love boys, and she hates 'em. But that will change.

"You know what, girlfriend?" I say to my little bitty buddy as she's trying to generate her some more spit. "You and me are a lot alike."

"No, we're not."

"Yes, we are! We hate being bored, and we're always restless, and I sure am glad I socialize with someone like you instead of eating early-bird breakfasts at Hardee's and playing in those bridge tournaments all the time."

"I'm glad I don't watch bullshit Disney cartoons," she replies.

"That's right," I say. "You don't care about those cereal box doodads that the other kids like, either."

We jump out of my station wagon and I take off that stupid velour sweatsuit as quickly as I can. I never let Ember's parents see me in my rock clothes, just in case they care. I really doubt they do. They seem to be getting less and less interested in their kid and more and more interested in their theme parties and vacations to islands I've never heard of.

After I throw my old lady costume in the back seat, Ember and I race each other to the door of the Red Lobster, which she picked. She loves their mahi-mahi. I told her Luster won't like a chain restaurant, but she didn't care. I can't complain, though, because I love their chicken fingers.

Of course, those little legs of hers beat my arthritic ass to the restaurant.

H o s t e s s

For the first time tonight, I mean my smile. I can't help it. There's a little girl, like, about seven or eight years old, and she's skipping toward me, and her skipping is kind of in time with the Muzak. I swear...she's an angel.

She's got curly blonde hair, a baby face, and the biggest, prettiest eyes. She kind of looks like that girl off those old Welch's grape juice commercials, only not as creepy. Her parents have got her dressed skanky, though. She's got on a T-shirt with a monster truck on it, Gravedigger. It's way too big for her and comes down past her knees. It looks like she's not even wearing any pants, which I've always thought was such a tacky look for a kid. She's got cute shoes on, at least. Black and white saddle oxfords.

“Hi!” I say to her.

“Hey.”

She looks behind her at an old lady walking toward us, probably her grandma. The grandma makes me smile even more, and I’m biting my lip, trying not to laugh. She has short but really poofy white hair and wears bun-tight blue jeans, black tasseled cowboy boots, and a T-shirt that says “Sex Pistols” on it. I can’t think of what celebrity she looks like, probably because there aren’t any celebrities that are old ladies.

“Hi! How many? Two?”

Then in a loud, high-pitched, old lady voice, the grandma goes, “No. Five. The others will arrive shortly.”

So I ask for a name, like I’m supposed to.

“Oglesby.”

I ask for a smoking preference, like I’m supposed to. But this time, the high-pitched voice comes from the adorable little girl.

“Smoking!”

And I finally get an excuse to laugh. I’m told to compliment the customers as much as possible, but I mean it this time.

“Your granddaughter is *so* cute.”

“She’s not my granddaughter,” says the old lady. “And I ain’t no mammaw.”

E m b e r

The dumbass hostess sits us down. Everybody here is dumb. Except for Opal and me. We like rock music. We rock out.

There are some families with moms and dads. There are men and women on dates. And there are some pretty-boys. That's who's here.

A waiter comes up to us. I see Opal looking at him the way she looks at wrestlers.

"Hi! My name is Todd, and I'll be your server. What can I get you two to drink?"

"Michelob Light," I tell him.

"Oh! Your granddaughter is *so* cute!"

"She's not my granddaughter," says Opal. "And I ain't no mammaw."

And I wasn't trying to be cute.

"Oh. I'm sorry," says our fuckface waiter.

"I'll take a Vervifontaine, and give her a Shirley Temple instead of that Michelob."

I don't want a Shirley Temple. I would normally be screaming by now. But I like Opal. So I'll hold off.

"I'm sorry," says Shit-head. "We don't have Vervi-what you just said."

No place ever has what she wants.

"Okay. Just Budweiser me, then," says Opal.

"Okay. Thanks. I'll have those right out," says Assface. Opal keeps busy looking at the waiter's butt. So I play with my knife. Mutilate. Mootilate. I'm getting good at not cutting myself.

"Now don't you cut off those purdy little fingers, Ember."

I point the knife at her.

“Ohhh. Don’t hurt me, now, or the Boogie-man will come and get you.”

“Shit. I’ll cut his ass, too.”

I’ve never been afraid of the Boogie-man. Because there is no Boogie-man. There’s no Boogie-man. There’s no Tooth Fairy. There’s no Easter Bunny. And there is especially no Santa Claus. I’m not stupid. Santa Claus is a big, fat lie used to keep kids in line.

I hate the holidays.

W a i t e r

I wanna bone this chick.

She rolls in with some big, goofy-looking black dude. I’m thinking they’re not a couple because they don’t look right together. He has, like, big Jheri-curved hair and wears a T-shirt with a poodle on it and bleach-streaked blue jeans and white dress shoes. He kind of looks like the black dude off *Saturday Night Live* but with no facial hair.

Meanwhile, she’s white. Creamy white. She’s got long black hair and wears a tight white dress and fishnets. She’s got the perfect amount of make-up and the perfect amount of cleavage. She kind of looks like that girl off of *Baywatch* only prettier and realer. Too bad she’s in a wheelchair. Still, though, I don’t care. She could give me a blow job, if nothing else, and you know I’m all about blow jobs.

What’s really weird is that the hostess I boned takes the wheelchair chick and the black dude to the table with the weird old lady and the weird little girl that’s not her grandkid.

I approach the table again.

“Hi! My name is Todd, and I’ll be your server. What can I get you two to drink?”

I try not to look at the hot chick’s boobs, but I fail. Damn.

“I’ll have a Hawaiian Punch.” She sounds soft and breathy like Marilyn Monroe.

“I’m sorry. We don’t have Hawaiian Punch.”

“Then I’ll just have a root beer.”

“I’m sorry. We don’t have root beer, either.” Boobs.

“Water.”

“Okay. And for you, sir?”

“I would like to drink a glass of Coca-Cola Classic, please.” He doesn’t talk like a black guy, or a white guy, for that matter. He e-nun-ci-ates each syllable like he thinks I’m stupid or that I have a hearing problem or something.

“Is Pepsi okay?” I am supposed to ask every time, just in case. Then he stares me down like I just made fun of his mama or something.

“No! No, it is not okay, you jumping-to-conclusions mother fletcher! Just bring me milk!”

“Okay. Thanks. I’ll have those right out.”

Dude. Good thing I asked.

R a y

People work there. People eat there also. I walk in, wanting to buy food and eat it publicly. A girl at work there smiles a big one at me. I smile one back and walk quickly toward the eating. Making her yell at me.

“Wait! Sir, how many?” I hear before I can reach the eating room.

I turn around to the girl.

“I don’t understand.”

“How many are in your party?”

I stare at her, thinking, flipping through my mind. Parties. How many.

“How many people do you plan to eat with?” she asks in a slow, loud voice like I am a retard baby. I hold up four.

“Smoking or non?” she asks.

I think with care before answering.

“I don’t understand.”

“Sir, do you like smoking cigarettes, or would you prefer not to be around anyone who *does* like smoking cigarettes?”

And then I remember how you have so many choices here. They separate eaters by their smoking here. I love this! But I just want to eat.

“I prefer being around a young black man, a little girl, an elderly woman, and a pretty girl in a wheelchair.”

The girl smiles.

“Oh. Okay. I think I *might* know which table you’re talking about.”

She wants to laugh but holds it. She thinks I don’t see the humor in this situation.

C u s t o m e r

Just when I thought things couldn’t get any freakier, this pudgy gay-looking middle-aged foreigner comes in. This dude is flamin, prancin in wearing flip-flops with white socks, *really* short khaki shorts, a cut-off shirt, and a denim fanny pack. Plus a big black mustache.

Otherwise he's your typical dark-skinned Middle Eastern-looking dude, but with no beard and no towel on his head. He sits next to the old lady wearing the shirt that says "Sex Pistols" on it.

"Guys, I never thought I'd see this day," I say to my boys. "We are no longer at the cool table." They laugh. I kick ass.

So I'm thinking this must be like a field trip from wherever they keep crazy or retarded people or something. Shit. There's gotta be some explanation for them to be together like that. Who's gonna show up next? A rabbi? A midget? A robot?

My boys and I continue to watch them as we finish off our Rolling Rocks. The little girl almost lights herself a cigarette before the old bitch takes it away from her and smokes it herself. This must have reminded Josh and Jeremy to light up, so I light up also.

"I've never seen so many bad haircuts at one table," I tell my boys. Another laugh. I love it.

That one bitch is hot, though. Too bad she's in a wheelchair, 'cause I'm sure by the way she looks that she's a major ho. The little girl will probably be hot someday. I bet the old bitch was hot like seventy years ago.

Dude. I swear the wheelchair slut is looking over here. She's all over my stick.

Josh's cell phone rings to the tune of an old Jay-Z song, the one where he samples from that song off of *Annie*. This should be the call we've been waiting on from Josh's dealer, Jerome. My wife should be putting the kid and herself to bed in a couple hours, freeing up the crib for my boys and me to party in later. I think I'll ask that hostess that I boned in high school to come party with us.

"I bet that group really knows how to party," I say to

my boys. Not a huge laugh, but I'm still the man. I laugh really loud at myself to compensate.

Then the black guy suddenly turns around, so we kind of stop laughing and look the other way to be polite.

A u r o r a

If I had eyes in place of nipples, I'd be losing a staring contest right now. But at least I'm not the only one they're gawking at. My friends divert some of the stares, which is one more reason to remain friends with them.

"Ooh! Let's make a toast!" I suggest after the waiter brings Ray his Mountain Dew. I've recently become fond of toasting because it's one of those things you can do to make yourself feel more grown-up without spreading disease.

"Yeah. Good thinking," says Luster. "What should we toast to, little Ember?"

"Vaginas."

"I like that. To vaginas," says Luster.

And we all raise our glasses and say "to vaginas," which I'm not too comfortable with.

I'm at an awkward age and have been for nineteen years. And it keeps getting worse. For instance, at my dad's parties, there's the problem of talking to his friends. Numerically, I am old enough now to be expected to carry on conversations with them, but I never know what to say, and I always end up feeling dumb. Sometimes I think I should be like my sister the slut and move to California. Then I wouldn't have to deal with things like my dad's parties.

At least I don't have to worry about feeling dumb here, though. I can say whatever comes to mind.

"Your hair looks flippindicular, Opal," I say. It has been freshly permed.

"I know. I just got it done today," she replies.

"I was thinking about going back to blonde, but black goes better with the whole Satan thing," I say.

She simply nods. I'm accepted here, and I'm actually happy to be around these people. I see these friends as being like the vending machines in the basement of a hospital.

Back when my mom was dying, and Dad and my sister the slut and I would visit the hospital, the only source of pleasure or escape I could find there were the vending machines in the basement. Everything else was sick or sanitized, beige and horrible, and underneath such unflattering lights. But then there were the vending machines in the basement, full of happy, colorful packages, just like you'd find them outside the hospital.

As I've gotten older, candy doesn't even taste as good as it used to, but that's beside the point. The point is that I am capable of coming up with metaphors.

At this point, I am positive that those guys are staring at us. I know this type of guy from high school, and although they look to be in their early twenties, I'm sure their mentalities never made it past the twelfth grade. These were the guys that would cut in front of everyone in the lunch line as if it were their divine right to eat before the lesser people. These are the guys that had to be on the front row for the senior class picture so everyone could see them flipping off the camera (how rebellious!). These are the guys that rode with their windows down playing rap, always driving with the exact same pose, their left elbow

resting on the door, their left hand coolly draped over their mouth, almost as if they were posing for a senior picture. I didn't want any part of them then, and I don't want any part of them now. That's why I refuse to go to college, to avoid being around young people.

And they're looking at my friends and me and laughing.

"They're *still* doing it," I say. "I get so sick of this."

"It is a sad occasion when laughter is not welcome. If this continues, I *will* confront their asses," says Luster.

"No, Luster, please. Not again." I change the subject. "So what did you learn in school today, Ember? And don't say 'nothing.'"

"I skipped school today."

"Yes!" exclaims Ray. "I thought I saw you riding your dirt bike past tanning bed, but I had a customer and couldn't greet you one."

Even as he speaks, I notice Ray looking all around the restaurant, trying to find his man.

Then the well-dressed males with their Jason Priestley smiles and boy band facial hair share another loud giggle blatantly directed toward our table, and it is Ember, not Luster, who snaps.

"Shuts the hell up!" she roars, standing up on her chair, pointing her silverware at the men. "I have a knife, and I will cut you from your wooter to your tooter." I think it's a line she got from an audience member on *Jenny Jones*.

"Take it easy, kid," one of them says. "I think somebody forgot to take her Ritalin."

His idiot friends laugh at him, and Luster suddenly stands up.

"Please sit down, my rabid child," says Luster. Ember pouts and reluctantly sits. She lays down her knife, and I

take it from her, just in case. Then we listen to Luster, the spokesman of our group.

C u s t o m e r

So this black guy with big, goofy hair is staring at me with a crazed look in his eyes, probably fucked up on something. I decide to play it cool for now.

“What’s up, man?” I say.

“I apologize for my rambunctious dining companion. She lives like a Punky Brewster deluxe. She felt that you males were staring and laughing at us. Were you?”

“Nah, dude. We were laughing at something else. Don’t worry about it.”

“But I am going to worry about it. You are lying to me. It worries me that you can so easily lie like that. It also worries me that you think I am so stupid. So to quiet my mind, could you tell me why you would lie to me like that?”

“Well...Because I *can*, bro.” My boys laugh. I rule.

“Is my dining party so grotesque that you would utterly disregard our feelings? Is that what you are saying to me?”

“Well, I don’t know about all that, man. Hey, you can’t bullshit a bullshitter.” That’s my slogan. That’s what I always wrote in yearbooks next to my name and jersey number. “Hey—let me buy you a drink. No hard feelings, huh?”

I’m trying to be cool to this guy, but I think I just pissed him off even more. He sits down next to me.

“Oh, have a seat, why don’t you?” I say.

“I want you to tell me exactly why you would stare and laugh at us,” he says. “Put it in syllables.”

“Dude, chill, man,” says Jeremy. “We didn’t mean anything—”

“Keep out of this, Hilfiger. I am talking to the man with no hard feelings.”

That’s me, apparently. I would like to defuse this situation before I have to kick some ass.

“Dude—”

“Do you think calling me dude first cushions what you are saying? Am I supposed to know that you are being sincere since you take the time to call me dude?”

“Dude, man—”

“Bite. I have come to expect people to laugh at our motley crew. That is a given, you jerk-wad almighty. But I would like for you to tell me exactly *why* you are laughing. Can you articulate your thoughts, or are they as empty as I think? Is there any brain in the gleams of your eyes? Does that tongue know how to whip it? Can you enlighten a man who has heard it all and has even written it all down on four-by-six index cards?”

What the fuck? I’m all about being different and all, but this dude is a trip. He’s freakin me out here. He just needs to chill and hear where I’m coming from.

“Hey, man, it’s nothing personal,” I say.

“Nothing personal? Nothing personal? What are you going to say next? *No offense? These things happen?*”

“I don’t know about all that.”

“So it is nothing personal? You just randomly pick out people and ruin their evenings?”

“Nah, dawg, but like you say, you expect people to laugh at you. Just seeing all of you together like that. It just—”

Before I can finish my sentence, he starts digging around in the back of his underwear. He pulls out some notecards and throws one on the table. It says **MAKES NO SENSE**.

“Exactly. You read my mind.”

“It takes no clairvoyance to predict a humanoid’s sentence.”

“Oh. So I’m a humanoid, now?”

“Yes. A humanoid is what you are. You are another pretty face in the ugly crowd. You are a cop in a doughnut shop. You are programmed to the end. You can be read from start to finish in one sitting.”

“Fuck you,” I say as he throws another notecard on the table. It says **FUCK YOU**.

“I knew you would say that. You are a stereotypical human being. You listen to typical stereo.”

“Okay. Tell me what I listen to then, smart-ass.”

He looks me over before answering.

“You listen to Eminem.”

“Yeah. So what? Everybody listens to Eminem.”

“I do not, nor do my dining companions. But I will not stop there. I can unfold your life story here before me.”

I’ve never been in a situation like this before. This is fucked up. I don’t know what to do but to listen.

L u s t e r

You were born a mistake into a middle-class family that thought they were a high-class family. Your life was fine until your asshole parents divorced. Before that it was bike rides, baseball, swimming, and Nintendo. But after

the divorce, your Nike Airs walked astray. You blamed yourself at first for your parents' split, but then you learned to blame them instead, and on them you would blame everything forevermore. As a teenager, you felt your problems at home licensed you to rebel. You partied hard and lived for the weekends. You felt obligated to lose your virginity and you did as soon as someone would help you to do so. You did just well enough in school to get by, saying that you were smart but just didn't "apply yourself." You left home as soon as possible to go to college. You joined a frat. You let females control your destiny. You accidentally got a girl pregnant and felt obligated to marry her. You wanted a boy. You got a job that you hate but it "pays the bills" as you like to say. Your wife appears not as pretty as she was when you impregnated her, and your eyes are starting to wander. You and your wife consider yourselves better than your neighbors. You are depressed. You smoke weed to help you not be. You work out. You go to a tanning bed. You worry about your hair.

After a lengthy pause, alpha-male says, "Shut up. You don't know me...I'm not depressed."

You will be. It is bound to happen sometime between your divorce from your cheating wife and when your kids put you in a nursing home.

"That's it, man. Are you done, or am I gonna have to kick your ass?"

I throw one more card on the table, the one that says **EMPTY THREAT OF VIOLENCE—A FINAL RESORT**. My cards never fail. I've got everything from **TOO MUCH INFORMATION** to **I NEED CLOSURE** to **I ALREADY HAVE A BOYFRIEND** to **BAD HAIR DAY?**

I am done. I am sorry for confronting you as I have in front of your peers, some of whom are secretly gay.

At this, the asshole's friends look at one another nervously.

I know how much respect means to you, and I respectfully ask that you refrain from mistreating my friends and me.

"Whatever, dude."

I return to my table. I don't like doing things like I just did, but the humanoids make it so easy for me, and the fact that they make it so easy for me is why I do it in the first place. I can predict the prettyboy just like I can predict that the guy wearing a bowtie will be a smart-ass, that the traveling children's storyteller will be annoyingly eccentric, that the English teacher will love Garrison Keillor, that the bartender will be exceedingly confident.

"Why do you always have to make a scene like that?" asks Aurora.

You were the one complaining about them staring at us. Are they staring at us *now*?

The man's friends are comforting him, patting him on the shoulder.

Then a contagiously funky reggae song comes on. My dining companions and I spontaneously arise and dance in the middle of the restaurant, except for Aurora who just rolls back and forth. We dance like protozoa, squirming unattached, our bodies moving like they don't even know it. Music, music. Muse, sick muse. The sick muse we will follow to a timeshare on the moon.

I approach my victim, the professional humanoid.

Come on, dude! No hard feelings, right!? Would you like to dance?

"Oh, shut the fuck up!"

I smile, laugh, and proceed with the dancing. I dance as hard as I can since I know that any moment now, someone will tell us to stop and sit down, or more specifically, someone will tell us, “*I’m going to have to ask you to stop and sit down.*”