

She stared down at the street from thirteen stories above, wearing a two-tone bikini and wrap-around shades, her jet-black hair unsettled by wind, her long coltish legs beaded with sweat. Her sunglasses reflected back the twin crosshairs of a sniper's sights. Upon her belly the words were written in black:

Coming Soon

Rainer stared up at the movie poster from his perch on the patio of the hotel lounge, meditatively stirring his cocktail. The girl was unnervingly beautiful, her eyes just slits behind her shades, eyes that seemed to suck him in with a hunger beyond any earthly desire he could imagine. She was like a painting done by the Old Masters, an endless study of aesthetic mystery. But who or what was she advertising, exactly? He had seen her around for almost a month now, posed imperiously on the side of passing buses, on video store windows, on the plywood walkways of mammoth construction sites, on a hundred magazine covers in a hundred newspaper stands.

The waiter came out to the patio and announced last call. Rainer was well on his way to getting royally wasted, but he ordered one final rum and coke for good measure. He would have proposed a toast, to lost youth or lost loves, except that he was the only one left in the lounge. His peers had decamped over an hour ago, off to the next afterhours den of disrepute. For reasons unknown even to himself, Rainer had chosen to stay behind on the patio, watching the warm summer wind stir the shadows of the leaves over the table, suffering the same turgid torch song stuck on repeat on the sound system inside. All throughout film school he had been a consummate loner, and he saw no reason not to go out in the same style. There was a pleasure to be had in being alone with his thoughts, slumped over his drink like a

nouveau vague anti-hero, as comfortable in his world-weariness as he was in his black turtleneck sweater. He was in a reflective mood. It was his graduation night, after all.

Only five hours ago they had numbered well over a hundred, sequestered in the deathly stillness of the Fine Arts auditorium, squirming in their straight-jacket gowns, fanning themselves with the flimsy black caps that would never be flung upwards in even a mockery of academic triumph. No whisper of the June breeze could be heard in these hallowed halls. Storms of dust swirled in the faint shafts of sunlight that penetrated the glazed windows. Fold-out chairs squeaked and groaned in unison. Discarded program guides lay scattered and unread upon the floor. The red carpet was threadbare, coming apart at the seams. Time had come to a standstill, the earth was moored on its axis, entropy ruled the universe. Even the most long-winded senior seminar could not have prepared them for this. And meanwhile the Dean droned on and on, lost in his private fantasia, rhapsodizing on the glorious future of student loan defaults and minimum wage serfdom that awaited them after film school.

So relentless was the heat and monotony that by the time the speeches finally ended and Rainer stood up to receive his diploma he felt positively stoned, his eyes stinging and head swimming. Out of the haze he heard a distant voice calling his name, over and over, until the syllables lost all rhyme and reason. In a somnambulist swoon he stepped onto the stage. The black and white sea of caps and gowns surged and swelled all around him. The cymbals of the marching band crashed in his ears. Bolts of light lanced out at him from the audience, the flash of cameras and the glint of camcorders, all those parents who had spent a lifetime living vicariously through their children and sure as hell weren't going to stop now. Rainer tried to move forward, to cross the vast expanse of the stage, but his legs failed him, and suddenly everything was falling, collapsing, breaking apart like an old reel shredded by the projector...

The next thing he remembered was the hand of the Dean steadying his shoulder. Something sharp was being hammered into his hand: his diploma. The

Dean looked at him with damp rheumy eyes: ‘You were about to lose your balance there, my boy. As Zeus said to Narcissus, watch yourself! All jokes aside, I want to congratulate you, Rainer. You have a promising career ahead of you.’ Rainer nodded numbly, wanting only to escape the searing rays of the stage lights. He was dying of exposure out there. Without further ceremony he aimed straight for stage left, shielding his face with his cap, making way for the next bundle of nerves to step off the assembly line.

Rainer would have gladly spared himself the whole sorry pageant, if only his parents hadn’t guilt tripped him and strong-armed him into attending. After bankrolling a considerable portion of his degree, they now wanted proof that he hadn’t been embezzling it into a drugs-and-alcohol trust fund all along. Once he had served his time in the auditorium, there was the obligatory family meal, a Last Supper of fish and chips by Rainer’s mordant request, the conversation as usual dominated not by what was said but by what wasn’t. Was Monica going to show up tonight? Was he going to get irresponsibly loaded later on? Would he ever learn to start ironing his clothes? And above all, the million dollar question: did he have even the slightest clue of where his life was going?

As much as Rainer would have liked to console his parent’s anxiety over their baby boy, he could only take comfort in the fact they didn’t know just how profoundly ambivalent and disenchanted he really was. All things considered, he felt a certain pride in getting through the day’s multiple endurance tests with his composure more or less intact. There was some cause for celebration, at least. Whatever else happened, Rainer would be spared the penance of having to find a summer job. The grad ordeal had yielded a most unexpected dividend: cold hard cash. After dinner Rainer had been presented with his card of congratulations, featuring, what else, a sun wearing sunglasses, thinking smugly to itself: *My future’s so bright, I gotta wear shades*. Rainer could hardly bring himself to open the thing. A dose of sentimental drivel was the last thing he needed right then. Words therefore could not express his jubilation when, upon slashing the envelope, he came face to face not with the usual useless platitudes, but a fat healthy sheaf of unmarked bills.

According to Rainer's drunkenly optimistic calculations, this bailout should allow him to live *la dolce vita* for the next two months, at least until September came, and with it the life-sentence of working in a video-store gulag for the rest of his days.

Rainer thought of Monica, off at another grad party at this precise moment, lost in explosive chatter with her girlfriends, no doubt being courted by a long line-up of sexual predators. In a very real sense, tonight marked Rainer and Monica's graduation from one another. There was the unspoken agreement between them that today's ceremony would be the final deadline of their long and messy break-up. It was Rainer who first put forward the idea. He explained to her, tactfully and tenderly, that the sands of their youth were running out, that there was no telling where their respective destinies might take them, that as serious bohemians they owed themselves a measure of sexual freedom before it was too late. It was a moving speech, finely-crafted and finely-delivered. What he didn't expect was that she'd so readily agree with him. At the very least she should have been heartbroken, devastated, inconsolable. Instead, Monica now seemed to be the one enjoying the jet-set lifestyle of expensive dates and exclusive parties, while Rainer was huddled up in the gloom of his apartment, watching old *Twilight Zone* episodes and waiting for the phone to ring.

Nothing was going according to plan. When he was younger he had always imagined he would be in his prime by now: critical acclaim, lucrative royalty checks, a well-furnished bachelor's pad, adoring groupies knocking on his door. London, Paris, New York: he could have been at home anywhere. Instead here he was, itching like an exile in this seedy port of call forgotten by the rest of civilization, where the locals were laid back to the point of paralysis and all the clocks had stopped twenty years ago. So what was he waiting for? It had to be more than the force of gravity holding him back, more than the fear of ending up a little fish in a big pond. Even in these colonial backwaters, no one would be mistaking Rainer for a big fish any time soon. But all he had to do was look out over the patio, at the familiar jagged skyline all aglitter, and he had his answer. This was his hometown, like it or not. Its beauty and banality were his own. Its streets flowed through his veins, its brickwork

buttressed his bones, its parks blossomed and died within his lungs. As absurd as it sounded, he had a debt to fulfill. Someone had to put this godforsaken place on the map. Someone had to prove that even in the far reaches of nowhere anything could happen.

The lounge was about to close. The waiter was sweeping up the dirty confetti and cigarette butts from the floor, clearing the tables and chairs from the patio. It was past Rainer's bedtime. He could continue this brooding in the comfort of his own home. He stood up and settled his tab. Beyond the patio a few isolated raindrops stained the pavement. The wind had picked up, carrying with it the salty traces of the nearby sea, a scent somehow erotic and repulsive at the same time. A few taxis waited by the hotel entrance, taxis that Rainer could not afford, financially or emotionally, to be driven home alone in. He would be better walking off this malaise, embarking on foot for his journey to the end of the night. Or his apartment, whichever came first. Rainer took one last look at the billboard, at the cold and remote goddess keeping heavenly surveillance over the city. Coming Soon. In spite of the hang-over already creeping up on him, the words gripped him with a strange and unaccountable excitement. Whatever it was, let it come, and let it come fast. He would be ready.