

CATCH A FALLEN STAR

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I WAS FAMOUS once, long, long ago in a time almost beyond remembering. Now I am a bearded recluse, ensconced in the anonymity of this city's outer suburbs. My fame by any standard was minor. However, some critics exalted me as the poet laureate of my generation. Others reviled me as a poseur and a fraud. My ego inflated and deflated alternately with each conflicting pronouncement. My photograph, eyes afire with any of a cocktail of intoxicants, could be regularly glimpsed peering intently from publications such as *Rolling Stone*, *The Face* or *New Musical Express*. I receive royalties from songs that were hits in unlikely countries, only occasionally gaining a foothold in the mainstream charts—often enough however, to generate the reliably modest income on which I subsist.

Memories of my moment in the spotlight haunt my dreams. I recall snorting lines of an off-white powder streaked along the toilet seat of a more famous star's bathroom. Suddenly my nostrils teemed with a frenzy of cockroaches feasting on my brain. And the easy availability of the women, a surfeit of women to satisfy even the most perverse of my appetites. Once I screwed a girl who screwed a guy who screwed Princess Diana. Another time it was an assistant editor with *Vogue*—she showed me explicit polaroids of

herself entwined with the man whom I recognized a decade later denounced as a 'Love Rat' in the tabloids.

But it was the drugs that undid me. Drugs and a nameless hunger, an unknown longing for that which could never be fulfilled; not by the women so willingly opening their long legs, or the endless rounds of parties and opening nights, and especially not the empty praises mouthed by my servile retinue of hangers-on.

Do I sound disillusioned? I chased after the strangest hunger of all. In those fevered nights, immersed in a gelatinous womb, I was pricked by a silver needle and gave birth to the delirium of addiction. I was Icarus. I flew too near the burning sun. Scorched and blackened I plummeted, panicking into the embrace of a bottomless sea. The tendrils of an ancient evil wrapped around my core and throttled all hope from my heart. Demons assailed me. I saw a red light—that I knew to be a pinhole into hell—open up and pour its poison over my faltering, fragile sense of self, extinguishing my ego just as a suffocating black wind snuffs out a candle flame. Thus began my odyssey through the sub-world of psychiatry. The nurses and doctors offered me other drugs, which they euphemistically referred to as 'medication'. Through the asylum's barred windows I gazed, bewildered, at the hissing and sizzling electric green lawns—alive with a malevolent energy. And also at the other patients, who walked in circles around and around the ward, orbiting in their madness as satellites insensate, insanely dribbling and trembling; idiots on the march. I stared into the bathroom mirror, mesmerised by my pinwheel eyes, until I realized with a wrenching despair that I too was one of the madmen, that I did not stand so far apart from them as I—in my arrogance—imagined.

Years passed. I aged. My symptoms subsided but they lurked, still lurk, just under the surface, ready to erupt. So, I live on the edge of the pit. I have mementos of my former life—recordings, clippings, and photographs, as well as the letters from my fans, which flatter, alarm or embarrass. Last year I was approached by a commercial TV station, enticing me from my seclusion with the promise of a segment on a voyeuristic 'Where Are They Now?' program. I turned

them down. The money offered was trifling, insulting in fact. But my overwhelming feeling was of revulsion at the prospect of wallowing in the tepid vomit of pseudo-nostalgia.

Regret? I am wracked with regret, I cannot deny it. But fate has unfurled before me a red carpet to tread, till, at its end, I reach a doorway, beyond which lies the undiscovered country from whose shores no tourist returns. So, I live and will go on living until I am no longer a denizen of this tortured planet, this agonized Earth, so steeped in pain, so drenched in suffering.