

The Great American

1990

She was hot and wet and he was pushing inside of her. Low French moans escaped, echoing out into gentle lapping waves. Their bodies were a tide of turbulent water. He had tried to keep the lights off, but she had insisted that they stay on.

He wanted to beat her face in as he fucked her. Wanted her eyes to swell, wanted her lips to *bleed*, bruise, her small perfect teeth to break off in her mouth. He wanted her to choke on them as he raped her.

“Jeaaaaan....Jeannnn.”

Her nails tore through the skin of his back; he winced, throwing his head back, his body arching deeper. She screamed her pleasure. He yanked his body out of her, throwing a blanket over himself, to hide his still throbbing cock.

Julietta’s bones were cooking under the skin. It had never been this raw or passionate. Something in his eyes told her he would be hers now. She would not have to share him again with anyone. She reached for the blanket, tugging on it. “Let me under *mon chéri*.”

“No. Play a game with me.”

“I thought the game was ended.”

“Never.” John smiled boyishly, but then without warning the boy in him was gone. “Sit at the edge of the bed. I don’t want to feel one spring move under me. Understand?” He watched her nod enthusiastically, his back propped against her headboard. “Start from the bathroom door and come towards me.”

Julietta was shaking, tingling in excitement for what was soon to come. She padded her way to the bathroom door; her legs wobbled, but she turned with the expertise of her younger modeling days.

She came to the edge of the bed and sat down, the same way she would when she watched her son drift into his dreams. She looked down at her hands. When she looked up he was standing in front of her with a gun in his hands.

“Pretend it’s my cock and put it in your mouth.”

A laugh lodged itself in her throat. Her mouth became dry. For a moment she forgot her son’s death and looked around the room for him, hoping he would save her, and then the cold reality of everything came back. Throwing herself out the window looked to be her one exit out.

“It’s not loaded.” He dropped it in her hands and smiled.

“Then it cannot be your cock, *chère*.” The heavy weight of it made her hands buckle. It was black ice between her clammy palms, a shiver sliced through her. She forced herself to laugh, dragged breath in, panting with the effort, she gulped air down like water.

Julietta turned it in her trembling hands, her fingertips running along the grooves and barrel. She pretended to be fascinated, but coldness pulled on her gut and weighed her mind down. This was wrong.

She wanted to throw the thing away; this mechanical monster had been the death of her sole child. She had hidden her grief from John, afraid that had she allowed herself to feel the devastation she would become hysterical and he would leave her as well.

Her body started to go into survival mode. *The gun should have a safety on it, but where?* She had never seen a real gun until now. It was hopeless.

He watched her whole body tense, when she fingered the trigger. “Put it in your mouth and suck hard on it.” John turned his back on her, every hair on his neck standing and got beneath the satin sheets of her bed. He watched her tongue roll around the barrel, watched her white teeth scrape it.

“Harder.”

She clamped her lips around the barrel, sliding it into her mouth, farther, until she choked. Her eyes watered.

“I want to see you closer up.”

She slipped the gun from her mouth and stood up from the bed, coming to him.

“No...down. I’ll come to you.” His hands tensed, and still they managed to shake. “Let me help a little.”

Hesitant she pushed the gun back between her lips, her head raised, bending as far back as she could to level her eyes on him. It was important to keep looking at him, no matter what. *Stay with him...just stay with him.*

“How do I feel in your mouth?”

She nodded, her eyes drowsy.

“Good?”

Again she nodded, vigorously this time.

His hands came up, caressing the trigger that her pointer finger was curled around. He dallied with the skin that stretched across where her life line was, and stroked. “You never asked.”

Confusion filtered into her eyes like the plunge of a knife.

“*Courtian...you never even asked...how?* Hell, you stopped watching television for months after it happened, stopped getting the paper. You slammed the door in the police officers faces when they came knocking at your door to tell you.

But I am going to tell you—” Both his hands gripped the gun, “and show you, *exactly* how your son died.”

Saliva kicked in her mouth, she dry heaved on the metal barrel, warm and slick from the wet heat of her mouth. Tears gathered.

“*Keep your belly empty for me tomorrow, I want to cook something perfect for us.*” He shrugged, setting those green eyes on her when she asked where dinner was. Now she whimpered, her teeth rattling against the carbon metal.

“I imagine he was sitting just where you are. Hard to pinpoint it though—” he glanced at the foot of the bed, seeing Courtian lying dead, eyes frozen, hollowed out meat.

His mind went blank, his voice gruff. “Can’t say how much the force of the—shot flung him back. But this is probably about right.” He looked down, judging where she sat, and taking one hand off the gun pushed down on the space in front of her on the bed.

“After I stopped screaming, and all his blood and pieces of brain had been cleaned out of the room—”

Julietta huffed over the barrel.

“It wasn’t just any ‘ole gun, sweetie. It was a scattergun.”

She blinked in confusion.

“A shotgun. When Cordy came with me on a few games we’d go up to the skeet range on the off hours. We’d hide it in my baseball bag.” *Enough with the explanation. She’s not your mother.*

“And he blew himself a hole in his face as big as your head, love. Wasn’t much left...But you interrupted me, as I was saying...I sat there just looking down at him, wondering why he did it, of course. But do you want to know what I really wondered?”

Her eyes trained on him. Her stomach flipped, with the images of her dead son all over the floor. She did not want to know. Her son was twenty and dead. It was cruel enough he was gone forever; she wanted to be spared the “how” the “why” the “when” of it.

“Nodding for me would be a good thing Julietta.”

She nodded.

“I wondered what all his last thoughts were. And then I thought, Julietta is his mother, she’s certainly not much of one, but Courtian is half of you right? Unless that’s a lie too?” He turned thoughtful his attention fixed on the carpeting. “Maybe he’s just one of the bastard kids your ex baggaged you with. That fuckin’ Spic must’ve had a hundred girlfriends.”

She was ready to claw at him, but thought better of it.

“Courtian didn’t look much like you...” He brushed his free hand over her face, gliding over her moist warm skin. “I guess I’ll just have to take your word on it, but I can’t help but ask. What are you thinking up here?” With the same hand he tapped her temple. “What are your last thoughts?”

Tears rolled down her cheeks, brown eyes rolling.

“Who are these for? Courtian? Or yourself? Nevermind, it doesn’t really matter now anyway. It’s too late for you.” *Why are you killing her?* He blanched at the sudden thought.

He pulled the barrel from her mouth; spittle clung to it, thin as a strand of spider webbing.

“I don’t want to die.”

“That’s rational. Courtian killed himself, which means he—” *He was sad inside.*

Courtian didn’t want to die. In that moment he was unbelievably sad, why can’t you see that?

“Was crazy. I want to know what you’re thinking!”

“Don’t kill me, please don’t.”

The barrel slammed into her mouth, he could hear teeth hitting the metal. “Do better than that Julietta. The only way this gun is coming out of your mouth is if you stop begging like a French whore.” He ducked his head.

Her lips quivered, tears wetting them, making them redder. The expression on her face was a toddler’s on the verge of wailing. She sputtered around the black barrel, her mouth soggy with tears and saliva. Her eyes accepted defeat as he pulled the gun from between her lips.

“What?”

“I’m thinking—” She swallowed the pool of saliva in her mouth, her whole body shuddering.

She bit down on her bottom lip with a chipped front tooth, “That this is my punishment from God, for not loving him the way—” Her lips trembled, her small chin going into spasm, “he deserved to be loved.”

“And how’s that?”

Her eyes went to the front of the bed, and remembered her son’s tiny arms holding her close, his fingers catching in her hair. The way he looked at her, as though she were the answer, or at least had the answer.

“Sing me French Maman.”

She closed her eyes, “*Je suis, désolé.*” Her lids lifted. “I should have loved him always, not when I wanted to love him. I should have loved him when he needed it the most, and I

didn't, I was not there. I didn't know how to...be there. Nobody ever told me how a mother was supposed to be."

"Touching. I've thought that all my life." He saw her brown eyes spring in bewilderment, before driving back into absolute fear. "Thought, that you were a touching woman."

He lowered until he was on his haunches, eye to her eye. "Gentle...delicate...even as a child I thought I might break you with just a hug," his other hand was around the gun again and glided it up her cheek.

He stroked her high cheek bone and down her small clenched jaw, "And beautiful, but then again you've always been beautiful, haven't you?" He got on his knees, wincing, his mind muddled until adrenaline pricked him like syringes.

Though it was dark she could still see his eyes shift to a deeper color, her blood went thick, cold in her veins. She saw the muscles in his jaws bunch, his lids lower until they were cracks in his face.

"You were something to fuck. And now the next time you're out on display I'll be seeing you, but you won't be seeing me! *You get me?*" The last three words were shouted.

He was smiling, as though his tongue hadn't slashed her. "This is a beautiful room love, try not to make a mess."

"Wha—" Her mouth opened wide and stopped. Before she was pulled out of her body the metal barrel shoved into the back of her mouth and exploded.

2001

“He hated the shade that fixed its way down deep inside him. It sat in his spine and crawled upwards, a centipede of madness that seemed to have no end. But it was *his*.”

The final sentences echoed throughout the car’s interior. Although he was never one to join the masses, John found himself intrigued by the popular novel. Now that the audio book had ended, the car seemed too quiet. The malignant silence embedded itself into every cell in his body.

He cradled the back of his neck with his hand, and it calmed him. Dawn approached, light pinks and purples dousing the edges of a black sky.

Bright red paint from the wrecked convertible jumped out of the unlit morning like an emergency flare. The nose of the car had been pushed in, until it resembled a crushed soft drink can. Only the battered guardrail had kept the car from tearing into the pines. The accident was fresh. An acrid smell of burnt rubber still radiated off the tires.

The high beams of John’s Range Rover glanced off the car’s body. He remembered that red. He could still feel sleek red metal on the pads of his fingers.

He accelerated and the red car’s image grew smaller in his rearview mirrors. Gasoline fumes snaked into his nostrils. He lowered his window and breathed in the morning air to clear the smell. The wind cooled the back of his fevered neck, where the muscles were knotted with tension.

He drove another five miles before his brain registered the image; it was there, but seemed somehow unreal to him. A bloody arm draped against the wrecked car's door. *Amber's arm*. He twisted the volume dial on the radio and started to hum along with a guitar solo.

He saw no red and blue flashing lights. He heard no shrill siren. There would be no rescue. Unless he turned back or used his cell-phone to call for help, she would be dead. He was not going to turn around, and the silver cell-phone would continue resting comfortably on the leather seat beside him.

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John averted his eyes from the newspaper bins outside Julian's Diner and walked inside. The heavy scent of fresh-roasted coffee beans wafted through the air, drowning out other aromas and making every customer who crossed the dirty yellow linoleum feel a little bit more alive.

The chatter and clattering of porcelain cups and plates created a wall of morning sound. Way in the back the antique jukebox was voiceless. It seemed displaced, a rotting tooth against the backdrop of the diner, a device suddenly without purpose. Overcoat in hand, John took a seat in his regular booth.

His chin went up when a waitress spotted him. He didn't give her a chance to ask him what he wanted. "I'll have a plain glazed donut—make that two—and a black coffee." He smiled, his eyes darting to the counter where the donuts glistened under glass domes.

The waitress didn't bat one heavily blackened eyelash.

Today's waitress was no stranger, but he didn't feel comfortable around her. She always gave him the feeling that she wanted something out of him; the gaze from her black almond-shaped eyes said as much as it slid over his body, she wanted more than just a good tip.

She was petite and pleasant enough to look at, but the creases at the corners of her mouth and crow's feet at the corners of her eyes told him she was well into her thirties.

Long hair, no doubt dyed red, swung down to her breasts, locks curling around her nametag. He picked a stirrer out of the assorted breakfast accompaniments and tapped the table. She was alluring for her age, but there was something about her that didn't sit well.

He frowned at his unsteady thoughts, and let them rest.

Julian's Diner was like a second home. He'd frequented it every day all through school until the Red Hawks had drafted him as their up-and-coming left fielder, right after his senior year in high school. Back then, the diner offered good food and lengthy conversation. Now it offered him anonymity. Most of Old Man Julian's patrons were past seventy, and though they liked their baseball, their cataracts left John camouflaged.

None were likely to have heard him speak, and even if they had, their ears were just as shoddy as their eyes. John didn't see how men could keep on living that way, going through life half blind, having to ask people to repeat what they said louder and louder, wetting their pants if they sneezed or coughed too hard. And they did it with a smile, at least, the old men at Julian's did.

John found himself looking forward to hearing their stories of war, marriage, and women. They never spoke of their childhoods. Apparently, those memories were too painful or long forgotten.

"No jelly donut, hon?" The waitress smiled broadly, more lines around her eyes popping out of secret places.

"Not today. Can't afford the risk. Just got this suit, and I don't want to take any chances with it."

“That color goes well on you, hon.”

John ignored her compliment and adjusted his new suit; the cool silk lining conformed to every muscle. The ribbon cutting hadn't lasted long and he couldn't help but be glad. A skinny red ticker on the wall ticked just past the nine-fifteen mark. An hour had gone by since the new Girls and Boys Club opening.

The time had seemed to fly past him earlier, but now he drummed his fingertips on the white lacquered tabletop for lack of something better to do. He hated idleness. His attention settled back on the waitress. *Why isn't she leaving?*

“No paper either?”

His head snapped back. If she called him “hon” one more time he would've broken her over-tanned, sun-spotted neck. “Yeah, well, the world won't go to hell if I don't read the paper, now will it, Rita?”

Her black eyes measured him, burning through his new Baroni suit.

“It's *Beth*. The tag says *Beth*.” A foul smell burst from her mouth like a soapy bubble, heavy ash mixed with sweet tea. She tapped her pencil on the nametag and swallowed her Texan temper, whispering beneath her breath, “Damned gringo...”

He sat, watching her, not caring. They all wanted to say something. She was no different, but he wasn't about to let her speak her mind twice. “Like it really matters. You know what—fuck it. I can go without a paper *and* a donut.”

He picked up his overcoat, slinging it over his shoulder and came so close to knocking Beth down that she had to do a quick turn about. Her order pad fell to the floor.

“Always in such a rush?”

The voice came out of nowhere. It nailed his feet to the yellow linoleum. He couldn't have moved if he'd wanted to. It shouldn't be her, it *couldn't* be her. He didn't see spirits; he didn't believe in them.

Blue, tranquil eyes stared at him. His rough fingernails dug into his palms.

"You okay?" She stood in front of him, oblivious to the patrons eating their breakfasts and the servers scurrying through the narrow fairway, trays overflowing with sausages, eggs, and pancakes.

"I'm great." He unclenched his fingers from his sticky hands.

Beth took her time picking up the pad of paper off the floor and slid behind a crackled countertop, wiping at a spot of spilled coffee as she bustled around. In shock over his behavior, she did her best to keep busy. She found it hard to deal with this cocky bullshit when the sun had been out of bed only a few short hours.

"You don't remember me, do you?" the blue-eyed young woman in front of him asked. "It's all right. There's no real reason you should. It's been a long time." She cocked her head, not peering up at his face, but staring directly at his navy tie.

John remained silent, waiting for her eyes to connect with his.

When she looked up and began to speak, her voice quavered. Her hands trembled and she hid them deep in the back pockets of her cut-off jeans. "We went to high school together."

Her name rolled out of his mouth, like a long-remembered prayer. "Amber Rose."

She brightened. Her hands slipped back out of her pockets, swinging at her sides in excitement, as though they were dancing.

Then it appeared: the smile he wanted. He felt the same way he had when they were both in high school. Every time her eyes sparkled, each time the corners of her lips turned upward, he

wanted to be the reason. He believed no one else cajoled the dimple in her left cheek out of hiding. She'd given him everything inside of her when she smiled. Nobody had done that since.

"Your name's been stuck in my head lately." His eyes soaked her up. She *looked* real. He remembered she'd once asked him the color of his eyes.

"Some sort of green," he'd replied, quickly adding, "a sexy green. Look real close." He bent down until his face loomed inches from hers. "Just want to be on your level. What color are your eyes?"

At times they'd appeared gray, sometimes hazel.

"Some kind of blue." Amber answered, and she smiled, her eyes glossy. She closed more of the space between them. "See?"

John studied her face. He imagined his hands fondling her cheeks as though the soft patches of skin were a more erotic part of her body. He wanted to breathe their delicate pinkness into himself, to rub his stubble-covered jaw over them.

Had he looked too hard at her in high school, his popularity might have been called into question. Amber Rose hadn't been a part of the upper social echelon. But now he couldn't stop looking. He memorized her nuances and features, just in case he never saw them again. The pixie nose, the curve of her cheek, small velvet ears, the golden hair his fingers itched to touch.

She smiled two cups worth of sugar. "Yours too. But my reasons are different from yours, I'm sure..."

Her fingernails dug into the blue jean material covering her thigh and scratched. The sound of the movement slipped into his ears with daggered points.

“Mine *too*?” He smoothed his hand down over his tie, ridding himself of the sweat she had caused.

“Your name. But then again you’re always out there.”

“Out there?” *Why are you repeating everything she says? Are you a goddamned bird?*

“In the world. It’s like you’re everywhere. You look the same, except you know, you look better, of course. Your hair’s longer.”

She ran a hand through her own hair, obviously self-conscious. He could tell that he made her nervous. She’d always been quick to blush whenever he uttered a word or glanced in her direction. He’d wanted her in high school, although they’d spoken only a handful of words in their junior and senior year of school.

There was something in her voice now, something more than want and need. It was almost tangible. She was his and he was hers, though neither said the words out loud. They knew each other’s bodies, though they hadn’t touched. Each was sensitive to the other’s presence in the room. Back in school, Amber’s face and neck had taken on a red-wine-over-candle-light-color, every time his tall frame appeared in the doorway of the English class they shared.

He shook the reverie out of his head. Beth the waitress had her eyes on him, an eyebrow raised, as though she was chewing something over.

“Why don’t you sit down?” he asked Amber. He didn’t understand why she stood so close to him. Not that he minded. He wanted her closer, much closer—he wanted to touch her everywhere.

A waitress maneuvered around him and grumbled under her breath.

He gestured to the table where he'd sat earlier. His hands became aware of the coat over his shoulder and he smoothed out the expensive, dark-blue material, folding it before laying it on the seat. *You don't want to be here, John. Grab your coat. Get out!*

The cracked red of the shiny vinyl covering the booth made his throat tighten; he swallowed and waited until she sat down before seating himself.

"You looked a little agitated." Amber nodded at Beth, who was still giving him the evil eye.

"Well, in my defense, I've had a really bad fucking day—actually I've had a year of them." His right hand shot into the dark wave of his hair, and he observed her, the way he had in high school, his lids hooded.

He took everything in: the subtlety of the pale-blond highlights threaded through her golden hair, the peach color of her peasant top, the breasts that rose and fell with each breath. He wanted to reach out and cup them in his hands.

Her blue stare kept wandering to the window. She gazed at the street he'd seen too many times. There were the sidewalks his footsteps had walked a thousand times. He didn't need to see the street again. Instead he took the opportunity to gaze at Amber. Her breasts were perfect; he could almost feel their shape and texture in his hands, the warmth of them pressing into his palms. She caught him staring.

He grinned, apology ready, but his lips came down. Her smile didn't reach her eyes. It stayed on the edge of her lips, a fixture, as though it were a clown's smile made of pink paint. For whatever reason, his charm seemed to be having no effect on her.

"Now you see me," she said quietly. "Or do you?"

"What the fuck's that supposed to mean?" He snapped his fingers at a passing waitress. "I'd like my order back, if you don't mind. She knows what I want." He shot a look at Beth, who still eyed him, failing to hide her contempt.

The passing waitress seemed put-upon, for no apparent reason. *Jesus, is it too much to ask someone to pour a cup of coffee and grab a few donuts?*

John's stomach growled loud enough to be heard. "My stomach's getting excited," he said, smiling and patting his muscled torso. "What were we talking about?" His voice carried a

casual, disarming resonance. He attempted to let his mind and the conversation swim out of the brackish waters that began to enclose him. He wanted to relax. It was the reason he had come in the first place. She'd stirred everything up.

"Last night. You didn't see me, did you? I mean, you were there. I saw you drive by." Her forehead contorted.

The wrinkles that formed were tiny, without disturbing the youthful glow of her skin. Still perfect. Just as he had left her. John didn't play her off, the way he might have if she had been anyone else. "That was just a bad dream."

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Beth placed his order in front of him, briskly turning and leaving him to his own devices. The coffee's steam drifted up to his face, reminding him of smoke. He waved it away, as though it smelled of tobacco.

"Wait, hold on just a second—" he called.

Beth mumbled Spanish expletives and took her time returning to him.

"Want something?" He turned to Amber, a quick question with his eyes, then back to Beth who had just finished wiping her hands on the apron around her waist.

"A year of your salary sure would be nice, hon," Beth said after a beat sashaying her hips as she left him.

He scrutinized the faces that surrounded them, hoping no one had heard her comment. A few pairs of eyes settled on him, and he felt low voices stirring the back of his neck. He didn't want to be seen. Right now, he wanted to be someone else. His own need for safety made him forget the waitress's rudeness.

"Beth was my waitress earlier," Amber said. "She's something else, isn't she?" Laugh lines appeared around her mouth.

He flinched, jarred out of his thoughts. *If Amber was really here the whole time, I would've sensed it. I would've known it.*

"As much as I ate, she probably knew I wouldn't want seconds of anything. Not even water. I'm fine, really." She smiled again.

He knew this expression, which was much different than any of the others. Whether that was good or not, he didn't know. He would have given anything to be able to read her thoughts

at that moment. Usually he had a pretty good idea of what people were thinking, but he couldn't seem to get a good read on her.

“But last night—” Amber began.

“Really, you should just forget about it. It was just a nightmare.” He took a sip of coffee. He felt water closing over his thighs, his feet numb from the cold of it, but he didn't move.

“Then how would I know about it?”

“Maybe you're psychic.”