



THE LAST WORD



Albert stroked the book's black cover like a docile cat. Wading in the brook of estate sale buyers, he then opened the book and found all the pages were blank, inviting him to pour his sorrows into the creamy woven fibers. Albert loved things that were a bit odd with a hint of age, like the 1950s bloodstone cufflinks he found at that last estate sale in the Hollywood Hills and the lime green Victorian bed throw he bought at the antique store in San Pedro. He enjoyed speculating as to what kind of person owned the item, as well as how it was placed in a room. Not only was this book starting to thread at the edges, it even had a faded ecru bookplate framed with scrolling black ivy.

The Edwardian script read, "This book belongs to: _____." Although blank, the book had clearly belonged to someone — perhaps many people — but as far as Albert was concerned the book was now his alone.

After a hasty purchase, Albert placed the wrapped package in the back seat of his dusty white Buick. The wheels ground morosely over crumbling asphalt as he drove home under the leaden sky. Spring came late to Los Angeles that year. Numerous gray days strung together like the stones of an onyx necklace. Albert prayed that the lazy warmth he despised would not return anytime soon.

But even if sweet Persephone had emerged from Hades' lair today, Albert would not have noticed. He was pining over the demise of his relationship with darling Marla. Or was she demon Marla? He could not decide, his heart wagging in the winds of his volatile moods and shifting memories. He loved and loathed her equally. He briefly considered some kind of counseling, but

acknowledged his deep distrust of the ubiquitous psychiatric industry. Besides, the book would allow him to indulge in his literary and poetic aspirations. His favorite authors wrote in blank books with fountain pens. Why not he?

As he carried the book upstairs to his Los Feliz apartment, a coppery glare burned through the edges of scattered clouds as the sun dropped below the horizon. The apartment was cool and dark, the blinds coated with a soft layer of dust as they remained closed most of the year. Once Albert found his beloved fountain pen, he unwrapped the blank book and spread it open on the surface of his scroll-top desk. The black cover of the book felt like angora, as if he was dipping his fingers in inky silk. As he stewed over what he was going to write, he opened a bottle of single malt scotch and lit a clove cigarette, which he occasionally tapped into a floral porcelain bowl.

Somewhere between the third glass of scotch and the fifth clove, Albert found himself awash in more than his emotions. He blew on the pages to dry the ink and closed the book. He then wandered into the bathroom to piss. All the while, his emotions roiled and hissed like dangerous juices in the belly of a volcano. He could not remember a time in his life when he felt more angry and hurt. He had completely forgotten why he fell in love with Marla in the first place.

For weeks he dabbed every negative experience with her onto the pages. Every wince and sigh, every twist of the imaginary knife in his gut. Soon, the pages were soaked with his emotional poison. Yet, he himself was no lighter for the exercises. On the contrary, his hatred only clarified, his bitterness only soured more.

One morning he stirred at the alarm clock radio, a dirge of classical cellos and harpsichord. Albert shuffled about lethargically under the scratchy haze of a hangover. He ate dry wheat toast and coffee while ignoring the television. Then, overcome with the urge to admire certain passages he wrote the night before, he picked up the book and slung it open by his breakfast plate.

As he searched for the last entry, he found that a new entry in the Edwardian script had already been entered for today:

March 6, 2006

Dear Albert,

You seem to have suffered greatly and I would like to help you. But first, you have problems you have not discussed here, such as what happened to your antique pocket watch. It was your favorite accessory, but it's been missing since the office Christmas party. I do believe you will find it in the left desk drawer of one Master James Bickman, certain young cad and ne'er-do-well with a crimson streak in his black locks who sits in the technical support section of your floor.

He has kept it out of spite. He has not worn it, so it should be intact. But he has tendered his resignation, so you'd best act soon.

The entry stopped there. Albert shut the book quickly. Did someone get into the house last night? He darted to the front door: locked. He checked every window: locked and barred. No one had an extra key except the apartment manager, but that pot-bellied lout seemed the unlikely perpetrator of fine handwriting. Furthermore, it seemed a bit crazy that someone would break into his apartment just to write in his book. Had there been writing in the book before he bought it? He reluctantly opened the book again and flipped through every page: all blank, just like at the estate sale.

A sick white fear painted Albert's insides as he dressed for work. He created financial spreadsheets for the payroll department at the company where he was contracting as a payroll specialist. On his way to work, he obsessed as to who could have written today's journal entry. Was it him? It wasn't his handwriting. Even drunk he couldn't write like that. He certainly hadn't heard of Jim Bickman resigning. There had been no notices to this effect in e-mail recently. Of course, there was such a high turnover in technical support that he hardly ever noticed what happened in that sector, but he could hardly miss the crimson-streaked, Lord of All Things Technical squirreling around the office in his burgundy Fluvags.

When he arrived at work, he mechanically started his computer and launched Outlook. A series of subject lines for new

e-mail messages greeted him, but the subject line that leapt from the screen read, “Goodbye, Jim!” With an apprehensive buzz in his chest, Albert read the message and discovered indeed James Bickman had given one week’s notice the Friday before.

Albert raked his jaw to one side, squinted suspiciously and walked as casually as he could with a stack of reports in hand towards the technical support area. He feigned a distracted air, as if searching for someone who must certainly have strayed far from their appointed seat. If he found said cad, he told himself, he would walk on and pretend he didn’t notice. All the while, his eyes strafed the cubical wall name tags until he found one Jim Bickman. The unoccupied cubical was spattered with posters from rather dangerous looking rock bands and comic books, not to mention rows of small hostile plastic figurines brandishing Samurai swords and enormous black bazookas.

Albert quickly looked around — no one, nowhere. The technical support group was in their weekly team meeting, apparently. He swiftly yanked open the left black plastic desk drawer of Mr. Bickman’s cubicle — one yank, nothing but office detritus and candy. But another, deeper yank revealed a glint of brass...

His heart spun a series of kung fu kicks against his ribs. His watch! He plucked it from the drawer and shoved in it his pants pocket.

Such fortune! Such incredible luck! Yet the mystery teased at his brain all day and into his evening commute. Once home, he peeked inside the book. The strange journal entry was still there. Maybe indeed he was the one who wrote that entry. Maybe in his drunkenness he had tried to emulate the Edwardian script on the bookplate, the knowledge of Jim Bickman’s guilt and departure lodged in his subconscious from some forgotten conversation. It was possible and certainly the only rational explanation, as clearly no one else had been in the apartment between the time he had started writing the night before and today’s breakfast.

The recovery of his treasured watch was not the end of the mystery by far. Another entry appeared two days later, this time beseeching him to call his uncle in Miami because good luck “would surely find you in the conversation.” Uncle Mike was wealthy, legally blind and thoroughly sour from his sweaty ton-

sure to his scabby elbows. He had won the Wisconsin lottery nearly ten years ago at the age of fifty-six. With hired help, he managed to move his entire household to a sunny new home — light he couldn’t see that warmed his stubbly cheeks nonetheless. He quickly memorized his new environment and set about alienating his only daughter, Albert’s cousin Eustace. Albert had not spoken to Uncle Mike in almost six years because of the bitter old man’s evening calls, haranguing him for any and all of Albert’s shortcomings as a nephew. He even went so far as to blame Albert for his own parents’ deaths from cancers and pulmonary imperfections.

That had been enough for Albert.

Still, the journal had been correct about the watch. What harm could there be in calling Uncle Mike? Perhaps again his subconscious had reached out during one of his drunken writing sessions in hopes that he would heed some higher self’s considerations. Uncle Mike might be rich, but he was also very lonely by now. Not everyone was as complete in and unto himself as Albert was. He had his friend Bruno, the used bookstore owner, and he was all Albert required for friendship. Bruno was in France visiting family, so Albert had not heard from him since before he purchased the journal. He wasn’t sure when his friend was supposed to return.

Cautiously optimistic, although his ears still stung with his Uncle’s prior criticisms, Albert picked up the phone and dialed.

“Yee-ah?”

“Uncle Mike?”

“Oh, my stars...” the voice petered out to a thin rasp.

“It’s me, Albert. How are you?”

And the two chatted for over an hour, Uncle Mike making the occasionally prickly comment but for the most part behaving himself admirably. Eustace no longer spoke to him. The last few years had been very hard emotionally. He had had lots of time to review his life and finally realized how good Albert had been to him. Then, unexpectedly the elderly man apologized for all his brusque, insensitive behavior. “And you know what, Alby? I’m gonna make it all up to ya. Tomorrow I’ll call my lawyer and name you my sole inheritor in my will. Whaddaya say t’ that,

Mister Bicycle Pants?” (He had called Albert “Mister Bicycle Pants” since young Albert had learned to ride a tricycle.)

Albert was stunned. He thanked his uncle profusely but didn’t let the good fortune diffuse into his future hopes and plans until he went to bed that night. He slept without bad dreams or that dry restlessness that heartache brings to the darker hours. As a result, he slept in quite late that Saturday morning. As he poured his morning coffee, Albert whistled happily for the first time in several weeks since Marla had dumped him. He laid the journal on the table with his ink well and opened the book.

Inside, he found another unbidden entry in the Edwardian script...

March 11, 2006

Dear Albert,

Whatever you do, do not under any circumstances get in the car with him. Your life depends on it...

At that moment, the phone rang. Albert swung around in his seat, staring at the answering machine as his heart palpitated. As soon as he heard his friend’s voice, he leapt from his chair to grab the phone from the receiver. “Bruno! You’re back!”

“*Comment ça va, mon ami?*” Bruno answered. “Still brooding over dat girl?”

“No, no!” Albert answered quickly, daintily wiping coffee dribble from his lips with his Provencal-striped napkin that Bruno had purchased for him on his last trip home to Aix. “Everything’s great! How’s the family? What are you up to today?”

“Oh la la la *la!*” Bruno replied. “And here I was so concern for you! Well, all is fine and I am glad to be back home to my quiet place. I am still a little jetlagged, but I am going to dis place where dey have terrific steak for lunch, den I’m going to catch a film.” (He pronounced “film” as “feelm,” and could not for his life pronounce the “th” in any English word.) “You want to see somed-ing? Want to eat some steak? I’ll tell you all about everyding.”

“Sure!” Albert answered eagerly. “Sounds great! And I have news for you, too. Wanna meet there?”

“Ah, *bon?*” Bruno said. “No no — I’ll pick you up aroun’ one.” (He pronounced “pick” as “peek.”) Bruno was fanatical about saving energy in every way, whether that was shutting off unused lights or by carpooling. He didn’t care if it looked like a “man date.” Saving gas was ingrained in his French soul.

Albert agreed. When one o’clock came around, he had already gone through the newspaper and picked out all the films they could catch after lunch based on time and proximity. When he heard the short horn bursts of Bruno’s old Toyota Corolla, he tucked the folded paper under his arm and dashed outside, locking the door firmly behind him. He was still vaguely suspicious that perhaps someone other than himself had written in his journal.

As Albert approached Bruno’s car, the Frenchman flicked a cigarette remnant out of his car window into the driveway gutter of Albert’s apartment building. His car sat halfway in, his rear fender flanked by cars parked on the street so tightly you couldn’t slide a flat hand between them. The two friends smiled at each other as Albert approached the passenger’s side. Albert noted that jetlag huddled in shadowy hammocks under Bruno’s eyes. But just as Albert reached for the scraped car door handle, he froze. The warning this morning throbbed between his temples like a red wine hangover:

Whatever you do, do not under any circumstances get in the car with him. Your life depends on it...

The journal had been uncannily accurate about the watch and Uncle Mike. That realization sunk into Albert’s stomach like an ice cube. His fingers recoiled into his palm, tightening, whitening...

“Hey, Bruno?” he asked through the window. “I forgot something. I’ll be right back.”

Bruno shrugged. “Okay, I wait for you!”

Deftly paging through his mental excuse book as he turned toward the apartment complex, Albert couldn’t think of anything that would work without sounding suspicious. He glanced back at Bruno. Someone from the apartment complex was trying to get

out of the driveway. As they waited patiently, the Frenchman threw his car into reverse to let them out and slid backwards into the street without looking...

Perhaps he'd heard the speeding vehicle on that road but his jetlag misplaced its distance. What started as an insect drone bloomed instantly into a noisy black swarm of exhaust. A long thin scream fluttered from Albert's belly as he reached for his friend involuntarily. The other car's nose punched into Bruno's side, collapsing the Corolla around it like a handkerchief, then fishtailed toward the other side of the street. In the explosive mélange of crimson-slick glass, Bruno disappeared under the snarled lip of the other car's hood.

DUI, they said. Narcotics.

Bruno's funeral plunged Albert into a black abyss. He would have certainly been badly injured or worse had he been in the car at that moment, but now he was alone in the world. His alliance with Uncle Mike was tentative at best. He had no other friends.

Except the journal. Perhaps it was the only friend he needed.

The night of the funeral, he placed a pack of clove cigarettes on his writing table, a lighter, the pen and its ink well, then ceremoniously opened the book. He found only blank pages after the warning about the car. Not wanting to be distracted by the entry, he turned enough pages until all was whiteness. It was then he began to write. Surprisingly however not about Bruno but rather the harlot Marla who had left him alone to face the horrors of life...

March 16, 2006

Dear Journal,

*I am miserable, it's true, but because of one person: Marla. MARLA. I cannot forget her, yet I ~~had~~ wanted to obliterate her from my memory. I have never in my life suffered such deception, such disregard for my feelings. The world can take Br my best friend — accidents happen — but she has a choice. If ~~she~~! *# her husband is so rotten to her, so not right, why doesn't she leave? Why does she deceive everyone* ⁵⁰

heartlessly? Clearly she's a ~~li~~ liar — the sort of liar that should be drowned in the lake of fire until all of her skin curdles off of her bones.

You alone understand me.

Albert staggered from the writing table to his bedroom where he crashed onto the mattress, motionless. The night passed in a blink, the harried quadrille of stringed instruments spun from his clock radio the next morning. He hit the snooze button three times, then blacked out for a while longer. Marla. As he opened his eyes, the loss of her rather than Bruno burned in his chest.

After a while, he got up and went to work. Very late. He was reprimanded for not calling in, even after he reminded his boss that he had been to his best friend's funeral the day before...

When Albert returned home that evening without an appetite, he sat at the breakfast table, elbows digging into the surface as he pressed his face into his hands. How was he going to continue? What was left? After an hour of stupor passed, he looked to the open journal from the night before. The thought of watching banal television, seeing a wretched Hollywood film, reading a bad modern novel, or letting the dreary news of a corrupt world bend his ear all disgusted him.

As he picked up the journal, he noticed there was writing on the page *after* his entry from the night before...

March 17, 2006

Dear Albert,

As I was saying before, I would like to help you. It seems you've had a very bad run of life at the hands of an utterly unscrupulous human being. They say that people create their own hell when they betray others this way, but you and I know that isn't so. They go on blithely, free to wreak more misery and pain on unsuspecting people. There is no punishment, no jail and no remorse for their ways. This woman in particular sounds exceedingly vile. A true parasite on the hearts of men.

You should kill her.