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The Year of Smashing Bricks

Spring, 1973

I was 6'1", skinny, androgynously pretty with thick long dark hair. I was a mediocre athlete but had a talent for hitting things with my hands. I'd received a second-degree black belt in Sho-bu-kan Okinawa-te, in Sasebo, Japan where my uncle/stepfather, a low-ranking Naval officer, had been stationed for almost three years before getting sent back to San Diego, California. I'd gotten the black belt primarily because I was good at teaching kata to the sailors who came and went, and because I was pretty good at free-style sparring and real good at smashing stacks of Japanese roof tiles. Upon returning at the very end of 1969, we lived on Coronado, which isn't an island; seven miles of artificial Silver Strand make it, technically, a peninsula, but since Imperial Beach, a suburb of Tijuana that just happens to be on the U.S. side of the border, lay at the other end of the Strand, Coronado was, in all its xenophobic, militaristic glory, an island.

Hemmed on its north and south by huge U.S. Navy bases, North Island Naval Air Station and the Amphibious Base, Coronado was a bedroom community of palm-lined streets and manicured lawns; its heart was the Hotel Del Coronado, where *Some Like It Hot* had been filmed, and whose Victorian, sprawling beachfront I loved to cruise on acid. In 1972, I first dropped acid

and first voted—Orange Barrel Sunshine and for McGovern, though not simultaneously, as I recall—and sat with my buddies, all of whom had been born in 1953, to hear our draft lottery numbers announced over the radio. Mine was 339, a winner. I knew I wouldn't get drafted unless the entire nation of China set out paddling for the West Coast.

I was of course terrified of going to war, and couldn't believe the preternatural grind guys my age were subjecting themselves to for the privilege of getting onto the UDT and the SEAL team, hustling double-time for miles along the waterline in heavy black boots behind the Hotel Del Coronado (the "Del"), from the Amphibious Base to the fence of North Island, chanting those creepy rhymes.

I'd sit in the "Captain's Chair" as Barney Ward dubbed it, an outcropping of granite in the rough shape of a throne that overlooked the ocean behind the Del, and watch them trot in syncopation along the waterline. Their heads were shaved. They wore T-shirts and long olive pants and their spit-shined black boots sank into the wet sand, making each stride literally suck. I'd smoke a joint and watch them, twenty or thirty, recede toward the North Island fence, then grow larger as they approached and passed. I'd smoke another joint and shake my

head in wonder as they sucked sucked sucked out yet another mile.

One heard stories about them, that the Underwater Demolition Teams were composed of certifiable killers, that one simply did not fuck with them. They were like Marines but smarter and better, certainly meaner. And the guys who made it into the SEALs were transported to another zone of reality in which killing was an art, truly, in which “Martial Art” had resonance, and in which each of them was a meat machine fashioned for the purpose of stealthy murder.

I could smash a cinder block (sometimes), certain kinds of bricks (that hadn’t been fired), and many kinds of rocks, with my hand, and would get drunk at keg parties and exhibit that skill whenever requested to do so. I could beat the hell out of a Makiwada board with my callused fists; indeed, I’d fight just about anybody anytime, and was very lucky I didn’t get my skinny karate ass seriously mangled in 1972. But I escaped Vietnam by a roll of the bureaucratic dice (at least that’s what I thought; it’s doubtful that many draftees were being sent over in 1972), and a serious ass whipping by the sheerest dumb luck.

I met Louanna early that autumn. I’d quit Coronado High School in the fall of 1971, gone to L.A. to make my fortune as a songwriter and failed miserably and immediately. I’d whimpered back across that blue, arcing bridge to Coronado in early 1972, signed up for yoga and folk guitar in night school, and attended perhaps two sessions of each class; they gave me my diploma anyway. I enrolled at San Diego City College in the fall,

and met Louanna there.

I was no virgin, except perhaps spiritually. But, with the exception of hookers in Sasebo, I’d never had sex with a real woman, that is, a grown-up female full of sadness and resolve, and who had shed all girlish fears of physical intimacy. Louanna was long and gorgeous, and so feminine males ached in her presence. Cameron Crowe, my classmate in Greek Mythology that fall (he’d just finished living the *Almost Famous* part of his life) and someone I hung out with on campus, used to grin and call me a swine, his way of complimenting me for having daily (sometimes hourly) sex with so beautiful a female.

She was nuts and tried to kill herself twice in the bathroom, once with a razor, once with pills, but that’s another story, one that has to do with her father, a Bible-thumping prig who sent her hell-fire letters that made her weep convulsively for hours; one, I suppose, that also has to do with the fact that she was recently divorced from a man who’d been a Marine in Vietnam, and had spent much of his time there smack dab in the middle of the proverbial shit.

I, too, was insane. That is, I was a slave to desire; I went wherever it told me to, and that meant nightly, daily, hourly, into Louanna’s arms. I could not stand it when she spoke on the phone to “Mikey,” her ex-husband. I heard an intimacy in her voice that evaporated when she, always teary, hung up. Always when she got off the phone (of course I was too much of a child to give her privacy), I’d go out to the side of our little cottage in Coronado, a charming pink stucco structure

behind a large house on Orange Avenue; it'd probably been servants' quarters in the '30s and '40s. I'd go out and smash bricks with my right hand. I'd stack three bricks beside three bricks, set the edge of a brick on each pile, and then smack the hell out of it until it shattered. Then I'd do another. I got my bricks from a pile in the alley that seemed magically never to diminish.

I was nineteen; Louanna was several years older. She wanted to have sex all the time. All the time. Because I was nineteen, I could, at least for part of a year, accommodate her. I didn't understand that Louanna was with me primarily because I could have sex (almost) all the time, and because otherwise she didn't have to deal with me, that is, emotionally, because, of course, she still loved her ex-husband, who was unable to have sex with her at all.

At first I'd been happy to know that the reason Louanna had left "Mikey" was that he couldn't get the war out of his head. His head full of the horrors of war, he couldn't have sex, so in the beginning I didn't feel at all threatened by Louanna's ex-husband.

But as I'd smash bricks on the side of the pink cottage, I'd hear Louanna sobbing through the window, and would know that she very soon would need to have sex, for she would always need to have sex when she was sad, and was by turns ecstatically happy and inconsolably sad throughout each day.

She baked bread and made soups; she took a French course at City College and started speaking sometimes with the slightest French accent. Her

instructor, a peroxide blond Frenchwoman in her thirties whose most memorable features were her unabashed black roots and furry black armpits, had once shared a taxi with Sartre. From the first day of class, Louanna worshiped her, and all things French.

I loved Louanna in my fashion, which is to say obsessively and falsely. I loved my idea of loving her, of course, my idea of love, and therefore I loved only an extension of myself. I'm not saying that this is how all nineteen-year-old males necessarily love, only that that is how I did, how I loved that particular woman at that time of our lives.

For brief hours I pulled away from her, from that violent arc of joy to despair and back and back which was her almost hourly shuttle along the track of our days, and I walked the streets of Coronado, always arriving at the beach. I'd been poor most of my life, adopted just a few years earlier into a middle class family; I'd stopped thinking myself poor only recently. Still, all the wealth of Coronado, the rich sprawling beachfront houses, the perfect lawns, awed and intimidated me, though as I passed them, barefoot over the cooling cement, somehow they also belonged to me, were about me. A thousand sprinklers plugged permanently into the ground would flutter on after sunset, hissing secrets about grass and shrub, Palm and Eucalyptus, and of course as far as I was concerned, about me, for everything was about me.

Especially the ocean. I'd walk the waterline for hours, back and forth from the Del to the North

Island fence, the same route as the UDT and SEAL team, and sometimes they passed me on their evening runs, at the same pace as their morning and afternoon runs, and I'd try to make eye contact with them, but no one looked at anything but the shaved head in front of him, or if he were in front he kept his stare fixed on the distant goal, the fence going north, the boulders of the Del, south.

Or I'd watch the surfers in their shiny black wetsuits mounting swells, working them or getting upended. I'd never surfed, never wanted to, primarily because I was a poor swimmer, and otherwise simply didn't fit in with the culture of water. I didn't love the ocean enough to want to be in it constantly, always to smell of it, taste it, be permanently concerned with its disposition, to live my life according to the tides. Still, it was about me. The ocean would have screeched to a halt had I not from time to time stared into it, screeched to a stop or simply grown bored with its own machinations, and sad. I was sole proprietor of so much sadness.

When I'd return from healing the ocean by my presence, after dark, to Louanna, she'd be pulling loaves from the oven, miniature loaves she'd frozen over the weekend for that week, different flavors, cheese loaves, herbal loaves, dried tomato and basil. She'd cook split-pea soup and I'd smell it as I approached the golden porch light of the door. I'd change into my gee as she pattered in the kitchen, whispering French.

I'd do my fifty-minute drill: a thousand punches, five-hundred front snap kicks with each leg. The formal exercises: Two, Three, and Five,

then Tamati Basai. In the dances, the "kata," fighting was beautiful, because the attackers were ghosts, and I could read their thoughts. I moved through the kata like a smooth vanquisher of shadows and ghosts in the yellow light of the porch.

I'd take a shower before supper, negotiating around all her things, the ordered stuff of her "toilette," trying not to disrupt that order because I knew how much it meant to her, things being perfectly in place in that room where she spent hours applying makeup or weeping, and where twice she'd halfheartedly tried to kill herself.

Towards the end of my life with Louanna (in a couple of months I'd run twenty kilos to Grand Forks, North Dakota, and she'd take up with a French lounge singer she'd enchant in Mission Valley while I was gone), I met Mikey, her ex-husband. She'd needed to go over to his place to sign some papers, taxes or something. He lived in Ocean Beach in a little bungalow a few blocks from the water. I accompanied her because I needed to see him, this man Louanna loved but who could not have sex with her because his head was filled with horrors.

We took the bus because my '67 Mercury station wagon wasn't running, or maybe Barney had won it yet again in a poker game, or maybe we'd just decided the bus would be O.K. I quizzed her about him from Coronado to Horton Plaza in downtown San Diego, where we transferred. And I kept pressing her.

She was somber, even a little sad. She wore a pink shirt knotted under her breasts so her tanned

midriff showed. I asked her if she was sad because we were going to her old house. She said no, that didn't make her sad, that she wasn't sad at all, but I told her she seemed sad.

I'm just thinking, she said.

What are you thinking about? I asked, but didn't really want to know, and she knew I didn't. The sun hung over the ocean in the midst of its long, slow plunge through afternoon. But I pressed, as I always pressed, because I couldn't just sit quietly on a bus. I couldn't just sit quietly with her. She let me hold her hand, and stared out the window. There were only a few other people going to Ocean Beach on that bus, and they sat near the back.

What are you thinking about? I asked again.

I was trying to think in French, she said. I knew she was always practicing French in her head.

What were you thinking in French? I asked.

I was thinking a poem, she sighed, and turned her head in my direction to look out the other side of the bus, toward the beaches. She had a slightly crossed right eye, so sometimes, from certain angles, I couldn't tell when she was looking at me or beyond.

I was barefoot. I went everywhere barefoot. It was a karate thing. I hung my skinny legs over the seat in front of us. *A French poem? Who wrote it?*

I was writing it, in my head, she told me, and I felt bad for having interrupted her.

I pointed out to her, though, that she never wrote poems in English, and she said that she only wanted to make them in French. She'd been born and grew up in the Midwest. She'd never even been in the Eastern Time Zone. Her teacher was

the only French person she'd ever met. I suddenly became angry at her for speaking sometimes with a French accent, and angry at the entire nation of France. At City College, I'd search for her after our classes; she'd be walking with her teacher, a woman ten years older and six inches shorter than she; the black tufts of the Frenchwoman's pits blossomed and were crushed and blossomed again and again as she gesticulated and Louanna beamed in the intensity of her regard. They jangled in swift though rudimentary French until they'd come upon me and switch to English.

I was angry but didn't express it. Though I got mad often, I hardly ever let her know that I was. She'd gotten another letter from her father earlier in the day, and I knew she was edgy from it. Her father was a preacher in the Midwest, and did not approve of me. He didn't approve of anything west of the Rockies, but he especially didn't approve of me, for I was the reason his daughter would burn in hell. He told Louanna in the letters he wrote weekly that she should stay with her husband.

I'd asked Louanna if her father knew why she'd left Mikey, and she'd wept for hours, so from that time forward I'd not broached the subject.

The sun was at about four o'clock. I didn't own a watch, but I could tell time from the sun pretty well. I asked Louanna if she loved me. She smiled and said sure, she loved me. She touched my cheek and then hugged my neck and I wanted to ask her if she loved me the way she loved Mikey. Instead, I asked her if she wanted to have sex. She laughed and said sure, she wanted to. She said when we got back to Coronado we would.

He was shorter than I, thirtyish, with straight blond hair he wore past his shoulders. He had a large handlebar in which his mouth was lost, like David Crosby's. His eyes, clear and blue, didn't seem particularly sad. He shook my hand, and because I'd lived some years around the Navy I almost called him sir. He smiled at me; that is, his massive mustache opened like something that lolls at the bottom of the ocean, and his teeth were revealed. Perhaps I smiled back, but was certainly too nervous to mean it.

I sat on the slab porch with him, drinking a beer, while Louanna moved about the kitchen as though it were still her own, making tea and knowing where everything was, and then sat down at the kitchen table and began filling out the forms.

I babbled and he listened, smiling, shaking his head in affirmation. I sipped my beer and tried not to look at him as I chattered. I smoked a cigarette, flicking ashes that hadn't formed yet, flicking, flicking, sucking, blathering, swigging. He nodded and smiled.

I had to take a piss, and said so. I stubbed out my cigarette on the cement step and left it there to light again when I returned. He pointed over his shoulder with his chin, and told me to bring him a beer when I came back, and to get myself another. As I passed, Louanna remained fixed upon the form she was filling out.

It was a woman's bathroom, one that a woman may deign to allow a male to share with her, but which was wholly appropriated to her tastes and needs. It was like the bathroom I shared with

Louanna. The same brands of creams and bath oils lined the shelf below the cabinet, the same Dove and Prell the ledge of the tub. There was a framed ocean sunset over the toilet, and I stared into it, then zipped, washed my hands, looked for his razor, his deodorant, his stuff.

It was all tucked out of sight in the bottom drawer of the cabinet under the sink, in a shoe box: toothbrush and Crest, aerosol deodorant, silver Schick razor, Gillette blades, English Leather.

On the door was a poster of another sunset and a poem by Rod McKuen hung in its sky. I looked around for crud or pubic hairs, but could find none. The small room was pristine; the porcelain shown, the glass of the mirror was unsmudged.

We swigged our fresh Millers; I relit my Winston butt. He asked me about karate. Louanna had told him I gave private lessons, that I could break rocks with my hand. I said yeah, I could do that, but it's no big deal. He asked me to show him.

Louanna came out and talked a few details with him, official stuff I didn't understand. Then she hugged and petted him. The shadow of a palm tree stretched in the late-afternoon light across the porch. Roses and fuchsia mingled along the low, chain-link fence. A tiny herb garden flourished between the white posts of the patio overhang. They put their heads together and spoke in half-whispers for several minutes. They were so comfortable. As shadows grew and they stood hugging and whispering, I wanted to leave her there with him. I wanted to tell him how sorry I was that his head was packed with horrors. I

wanted to go into the bathroom and drag all his stuff out of the bottom drawer and set it on the sink where it belonged.

Does it hurt? He asked. They had their arms around each other, looking at me. They were smiling. *When you break bricks. Does it hurt your*

hand?

I looked at my right hand, opened and closed it. Yeah, it hurt, but I was used to it, that particular pain. But I said that no, it didn't really hurt, because that was the easiest answer. 