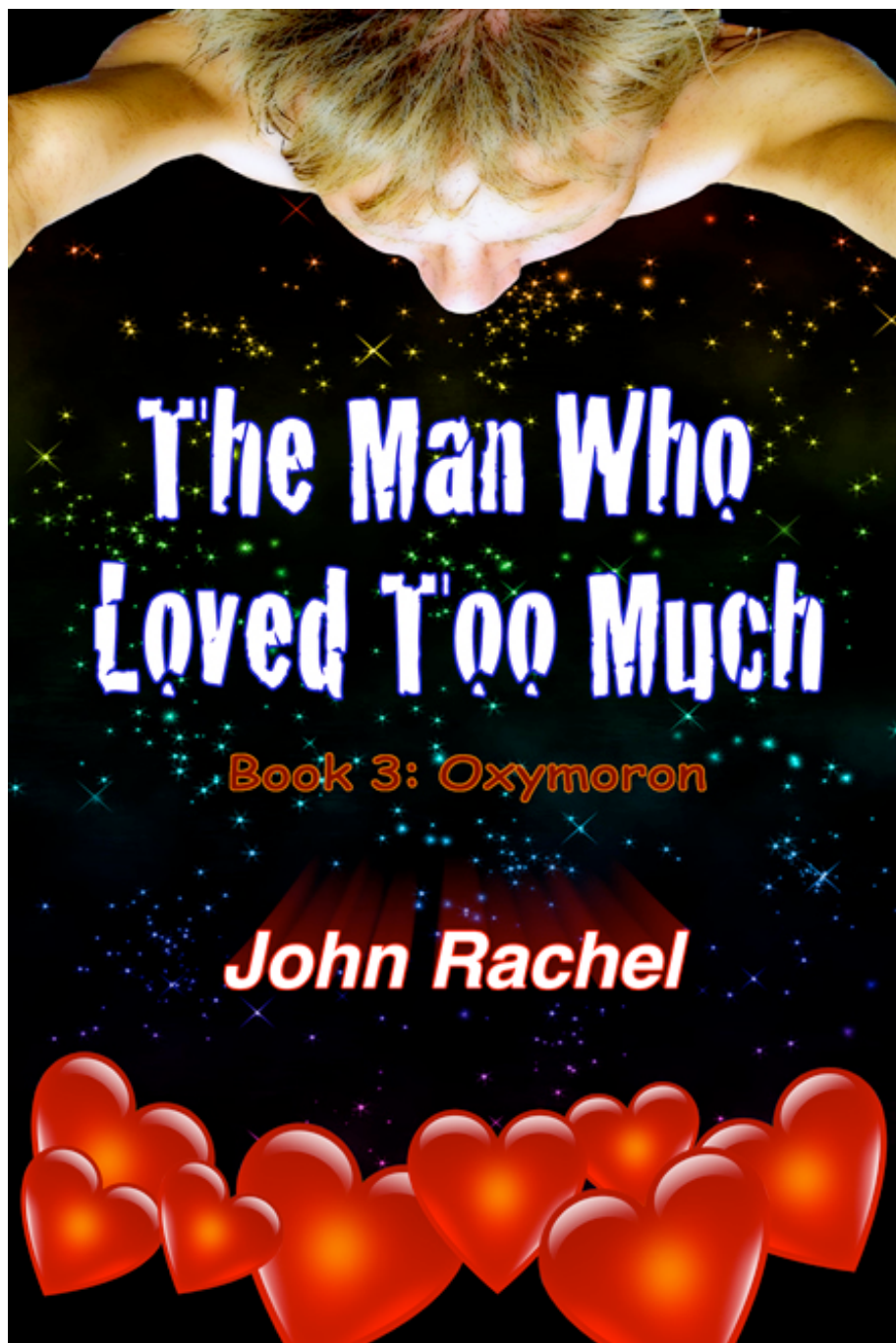




THE MAN WHO LOVED TOO MUCH

Book 3: Oxymoron

by John Rachel

Chapter One

[Sample Excerpt]

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Book 3: Oxymoron
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Chapter One

THE DAZE OF OUR LIVES Late Autumn 2007 Winter 2008

Planet Oblivion

A week had gone by. Halloween had come and gone.
Still no word from Candy.
Maybe she had written him off.
Life in the big city.

Billy was sitting in Planet Hollywood on Broadway, in the heart of the *new* Times Square.

This area at one time had been the unofficial strip mall for all of the depravity, decadence, vice, and almost every commodifiable form of affliction and death, available from the slimy lowlife of New York City. You name it. You could buy it there. Drugs, sex, stolen goods, guns, a gangland assassination.

At night, so concentrated were the bottom-dwelling scum on 42nd Street between Broadway and 8th Avenue, spilling out onto the contiguous streets for several city blocks in every direction, the *selling* public — hookers, hustlers, pimps, fences, hit men, drug dealers, con men, and other illicit entrepreneurs — often outnumbered the *buying* public.

All of that changed in the 90s. Using coercive police sweeps and sanitizing enforcement of zoning laws and business licensing, under the direction of then mayor Rudolph Giuliani, the area became a miracle of urban renewal. The massage parlors, peep shows, strip clubs, pawn shops, hooker bars, triple-X movie theaters, adult book stores, and scummy fast food joints were forced out. Planet Hollywood and scores of other multi-national restaurant, tavern and clothing chains moved in and made the Times Square enterprise zone their base for spreading consumerist homogeneity throughout the Big Apple, eventually turning the entire area into a family-friendly tourist trap — a Universal Studios City Walk with a New York accent.

Billy ordered the Spaghetti Pomodoro, sipped on a glass of ice water with a slice of lemon hanging on the lip, and watched people stroll leisurely by. They had to be from out of state. They were smiling.

Several booths away and behind him, a boisterous group of six was arguing and causing such a ruckus, Billy's curiosity got the best of him and he turned around to see what was going on. The manager of the restaurant was standing there, partially blocking Billy's view. But it looked like they were members of a rock band, some local act he didn't think he recognized. All musicians wore the same uniform anyway, so it was hard to tell them apart. The manager was trying to keep his cool, but was becoming more animated and appeared to be on the verge of throwing them out. Then the person directly behind the manager stood up. Billy recognized her at once.

Amethyst Reigns. That must be her band.

There was one extra guy with them who stood out only because he didn't. Unlike the other boys, he had on an ordinary button-down shirt over a white cotton undershirt, and a haircut he couldn't have paid more than six bucks for. Maybe he was the band's manager. Amethyst had mentioned something about a manager at the Mercury Lounge gig.

She spotted Billy, winked and gave him a peculiar but not unfriendly smile, then flipped off everyone at her booth and walked over to him.

"Can you help me out?"

"Why me?"

She nodded towards a fat, balding man across the aisle in a three-piece suit with the juice from a BBQ Bacon Cheeseburger running down his chin, trying look up the skirt of a waitress at the next table. She was immodestly bending over to serve another customer.

"Because fat fuck there is busy."

She gave him the address and directions for her studio loft in Soho — in an area that had so far been spared being gentrified into million-dollar warehouse spaces and store fronts — and asked him to be there day after tomorrow.

"Say around 6 pm."

"What's the favor?"

Amethyst laid her hand on the table palm up.

"Press the center of my palm with your index finger."

He did.

She held up three fingers.

"How many?"

"Three."

"Perfect. You can handle this. You may be overqualified."

Amethyst then reached down the front of her low rider pants and pulled out a small medicinal locket. She showed it to him.

"Used to belong to my grandmother."

She took out a tiny pill and handed it to Billy.

"What's this?"

"2Cb."

"What's that?"

"Trust me. Just take it."

Billy spent the rest of that evening and the entire night sitting on a bench in a large, popular park near Cooper Union. He wanted to move but at the same time didn't.

On a scrim that seemed to cover the entire range of his vision, projected from the occipital lobe of his brain like smoky filaments onto the shimmering fabric wherever he looked, were images from the last five or so years. If proper billing were to be had, he and Natalie were co-stars of what appeared to be both a comedy and tragedy, though a myriad of other major and minor characters made their appearances.

It was a plotless montage. Or maybe an experimental cinema nouveau piece, ignoring the need for clear exposition and narrative continuity. It was a long dark

movie, in the end making it clear that the comedy was only there to mock the tragedy, ultimately pointing to the pointlessness and futility of everything.

The sun came up, as much as it ever came up on the murky eastern horizon over Brooklyn.

He watched as the pace of the city picked up. Never fully asleep, it quickly returned to its normal adrenalin-raging tempo, horns blaring, tires squealing, pedestrians hurrying to their daily destinations.

Billy sat motionless but alert.

He had thought with making new acquaintances — Candy and Amethyst featuring prominently — and the change of scene, he would beat the grinning Grim Reaper of the living dead, the orchestrator of his nightmares, choreographer of the ghosts of his past, that demon dervish who with the sinister twirling of his mustache and arrogant flicking of his fingers, played Billy like a puppet jester, jerking and twisting him into impossible and agonizing shapes, torturing him with the worst suffering of all, the self-inflicted pain of his own self-loathing.

Billy stood up, exhausted and drained. He felt foamy and spent. Eviscerated.

Marginally confident now that he could distinguish the navigable elements of reality from the hallucinations, he started making his way back to his apartment.

It was fully light now. The street lamps had all been turned off. He walked across 6th Street, down 2nd Avenue, across 3rd Street, cut through a small park. Behind the only bench in the park was the body of an old man, probably a bum, judging from the state of his clothing, his lack of shoes, and the layer of grime on his feet, hands and face. The old man's head was bashed in and a large pool of blood spread out around him. He was obviously dead.

Billy stared at the corpse for some time, intrigued by the amoeba-shaped hematological puddle that in slow motion was pooling on the cement walkway. His emotional stasis felt curious. He was not in the least concerned about the loss of the man's life, or even what his own role as an innocent bystander might entail. He felt nothing.

Finally he exited the park.

He continued along 2nd Avenue and spotted some graffiti on an abandoned building. Primitive and Spartan. Nothing to distract from the message.

**Art imitates life.
Life imitates art.**

Okay. But what if there was no art?

Would that be the end of life?

Ah! That's what happened.

Art disappeared. Everyone died.

Metaphorically speaking, of course.

He stopped at a liquor store. How could you not love a town where the liquor stores open for business at eight in the morning? A few minutes later, he was back to the dismal torpor, the sheer ugliness of what he called home.

In less time than it would have taken him to eat the bowl of cereal he should have had, Billy finished two bottles of pre-mixed margaritas.

He slept for 14 hours straight. Then he smoked a joint. Slept 9 more hours.

When he finally woke up, he saw that someone had thrown a brick through his window. There was no note attached, so it wasn't a secret admirer.

He carefully picked up the large shards of glass, whisk-broomed the splinters into a dustpan.

Maybe he should read a book. He still had those same two staring back at him bedside.

Naw! Too much work. He might learn something. Or worse, find out things he didn't want to know. He had already had too much of that.

Billy lay down. Not that much different than sitting up. Except he had a better view of the water-stained, yellowed, peeling paint on his ceiling.

He wished he lived by a beach.

That way he could stick his head in the sand.

Up his ass would have to do for now.

A Small Favor

If he was nothing else, Billy was dependable. A man of his word.

He had one item on his calendar.

A small favor.

When Billy arrived at her loft, Amethyst was no where in sight. But the other members of Machines of Melanoma were hanging about. Billy cornered one of them. He was only three or four years younger than Billy, but looked at Billy like he was some elderly relative who had flown in from Kansas to check up on his runaway niece.

"Where's Amethyst?"

Nodding to a closed door at the other end of the room.

"In there probably getting her brains fucked out."

"What am I doing here?"

"Our fucking tyrant lead singer doesn't think any of us is capable of handling a camera. You're supposed to take pictures. Not make it too obvious. Us and him. Her and him. Him. It's for publicity purposes. Like we hang with the big stars. It's total bullshit."

"Who is this *him*?"

"Some fucking pseudo-legend from the 90s. A big wank from California. She met him during a video shoot the other day at the Roseland."

"She's in a music video?"

"As an extra. They needed New York's finest sluts as a backdrop for a burnout hair band. She just played herself."

"Do you have anything nice to say about her? She's your lead singer."

"She's got a nice ass. Standing behind her makes the gigs almost tolerable."

"So where's the camera?"

He yelled across the room. "Hey numbnuts! Bring me that camera. Right there on the table."

Numbnuts or whatever his real name started across the room toward Billy with a small Canon digital camera in hand.

Suddenly, the door at the other end of the room burst open and a tall, dark, creepy dude came striding out. He was throwing a leather vest on over his hairy chest. His boots thudded heavily on the wood floor as he bolted for the door and went running out.

“Who was that? He did look a little familiar.”

“Famous author, man. Wrote the *Better Homes and Gardens Book of Etiquette*.”

“And *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*.”

“What are you stupid? You don’t know who that is?”

“He married that famous blond chick. Big Hollywood star. Giant tits.”

“Oh right. The blond Hollywood star with big tits. That pins it down.”

Amethyst staggered through the door. Everyone turned to look.

Blood was dripping from her nose. Her face was badly bruised, one eye swollen almost shut. One of her lips was split and her teeth appeared to be bloody. She was naked from the waist down, except for a pair of gaudy purple platform pumps.

The guy Billy had been talking to was first on his feet and running toward her. Billy was right behind him. The other band members gathered around her as badmouth grabbed her by the shoulders.

“Am! What happened? Holy shit! I’m gonna kill that motherfucker!”

She fell into his arms and collapsed. He lowered her to the floor.

“Come on, guys! Don’t just stand there. Get some towels. A washcloth. Wet. Make it wet. Bring a pan of water. You. Get a blanket.”

Billy wanted to help. But he had no idea what he should do.

“Should we call the police? How about an ambulance?”

Amethyst was still conscious, though she kept her eyes closed.

“No no. Please. No police. I’ll be alright. Do I look bad?”

“You need to go to emergency. Let’s get you dressed.”

The guy who had had nothing nice to say about Amethyst, obviously cared about her a lot. Maybe with the comments before, it was all some sort of nihilist tough-guy show he put on for strangers. But now he really took charge.

Within fifteen minutes, he had her cleaned up the best he could, instructed her to hold a couple of improvised sandwich bag ice packs against the swelling areas of her face, got her dressed into a complete change of clothes, and with the assistance of Billy was taking her down to street level. He had sent one of the other band members ahead to hail a taxi.

Amethyst sat in the middle between Billy and badmouth on the way to the hospital. She was kind of drowsy — Billy smelled alcohol on her breath — and several times slumped over onto his shoulder, unsuccessfully trying to hold the ice pack on her face as her arms grew limp. Several splotches of blood accumulated on his shirt.

Badmouth leaned over to see how she was doing. Then he looked at Billy.

“I’m Kevin, by the way. But everyone calls me Hypo.”

“I’m Billy.”

“Yeah I know.”

They waited forever in the emergency waiting room. Many of the others

being treated at that time of night made Amethyst's condition look like she had come by to get one of her acrylic nails glued back on. Fire victims, gunshot victims, car crash victims. One guy had been bludgeoned with a baseball bat by a rival gang. A drunk had been hit and dragged two entire city blocks by a bus. A young girl had been gang raped, then stabbed and left to die next to a bridge abutment. A delirious man, weeping and pleading for help, was holding in his arms the bloody corpse of a newborn baby.

This wasn't some crime scene or ER reality show. There were no commercial breaks. Just a steady stream of real life horror stories on a Saturday night in New York City.

When Amethyst was finally admitted to a treatment room, she was only gone for 20 minutes. Her injuries relatively speaking were not that serious. No broken bones or even any chipped teeth.

She returned to the waiting area with a few bandages, smears of antiseptic cream on various abrasions, four stitches in her eyebrow, and a prescription for painkillers in her hand.

She held the prescription up between her healthy thumb and bandaged index finger as she approached the five guys slumped over in the uncomfortable plastic chairs waiting for her.

"Anyone want to get high?"

"You better keep them. You'll probably need them later."

They caught a taxi back to the loft. It had been a long night. The sun would be up soon.

Amethyst was in good spirits. Especially considering how she looked. The hospital must have shot her up with some painkillers. She definitely had an icy glaze in her eyes and her pupils were so dilated, her irises looked like the thin decorative line on the edge of a black candy dish.

When they got back to the loft, she lay down on a dirty futon mattress toward one side of the big room, which doubled as the band's rehearsal space. All of their equipment was pushed up against the opposite wall, below several industrial-type steel and glass windows, which were just beginning to admit the light of the new dawn.

The four band members, yawning and making no effort to hide the signs of weariness, started gathering their stuff, each to head to back to his own place to catch some sleep.

Billy sat down beside Amethyst. She was starting to wind down, gliding from the initial euphoric rush of the anesthetic into a mellow chill, and appeared to almost be asleep.

She opened her eyes and looked at Billy.

"I'm glad you came."

"I think I've let you down."

"How's that?"

"I didn't get any pictures."

"It's a damn good thing. This is a bad hair day for me."

"I think I saw a 24-hour hair salon on Broadway."

“I’m going to sleep.”
And she did.

Meet Me in St. Louis

Billy never went back to the Tunnel of Love or Planet Hollywood. In fact, for two months he hardly went anywhere. It just didn’t seem worth the effort.

He was low on energy. Low on curiosity. Low on inspiration. Low on imagination.

And he was running low on money.

Candy wasn’t back. Amethyst called a couple times but he had trouble taking very seriously her invitation to come out to see her band. He couldn’t imagine she had any real interest in seeing him and figured he would just be another body stuffed in a club.

His phone never rang.

He never called anyone.

He sat at home counting his money — he had withdrawn all but \$200 from his account — calculating and recalculating, trying to figure out how he could make what he had left last for as long as he needed it to last. Which was the big question mark. How long that would be he had no way of knowing. He had faith that Natalie was doing what she could and would call him when the house sold. Since he was on the title, she would have to ask him to come to Newburgh and sign the papers for the closing. There was no way around that. But so far no call.

He was tempted to ring her, maybe to check on progress, maybe to offer advice and some encouragement for what it was worth. Probably little if nothing. But each time he reached for the phone, he couldn’t gather the strength to actually pick it up.

Or was it the courage?

New York was a fuck of an expensive place to live. Even as modestly as he lived. The price of everything was off the map.

Maybe he should get a job. Doing what?

Never mind.

Stupid idea! Work was a four-letter word. At least for now.

This malaise, this detachment, this conundrum, this languor, it wasn’t just Billy’s problem.

Frankly, after 9/11 New York never quite got its groove back.

It was still the center of the Universe. But a center that was worn and sloppy. A loose fit. Drunk and wobbly like a worn old wheel. Or a button hanging by a single frayed thread.

No one seemed to acknowledge it. Not consciously. Not even Billy.

The whole of New York City was in massive denial.

Billy just kept his head down and waited for the inevitable. He wasn’t quite sure what the inevitable consisted of. Maybe it was the other shoe. The tax bill. A fat lady singing. A death certificate.

Whatever it was, it didn’t matter. It would come at a good time or a bad time. But it would eventually come. That was inevitable.

His phone rang.

"Happy Thanksgiving!! Are you eating turkey?"

It was Thanksgiving?

"Hi mom. Is it Thanksgiving already?"

"I know you New Yorkers are busy. But you could slow down for one day and celebrate the ... whatever it is we celebrate on Thanksgiving. Being thankful, I guess."

"The Pilgrims setting up shop. Having a friendly meal with the natives so that they could kill them off later."

"Billy Billy! What am I going to do with you? Such a bitter view of American history. Anyway, I called to see how you are and invite you to spend Christmas with me. How about it? You want to spend the holidays with an old lady?"

"Gosh, mom. I'd love too. But I'm pretty broke."

"Listen, my stubborn and proud baby. First of all, if you need money I can send you some."

"I'll pay it back."

"I know you will. So don't worry about it. Besides, this is my treat. A very special Christmas holiday. You and I are going to St. Louis."

"St. Louis? What's in St. Louis?"

"Red Wing hockey! That's what!"

His mom never ceased to amaze him. He had no idea she liked hockey. And maybe she hadn't always. But at least for now, she had become a doting, adoring fan of the Detroit home team hockey club. They were scheduled to play St. Louis five days before Christmas, then the day after. She wanted to make a week-long vacation of it, just the two of them.

"They are kickin' ass this year, Billy. They're 15, 5 and 1. Can you believe it? 15 wins, 5 losses and a tie. People have already got Stanley Cup fever. The games are a huge party!"

"What about dad?"

"The usual. Vegas. It's become his yearly ritual. It's like going to Mecca."

"Are you sure? I mean—"

"I'm absolutely sure! We're gonna have a good time. Meet me in St. Louis, Billy Boy."

And so they did.

First she sent him \$3000 out of her "secret savings account", then he received a FedEx containing an airline ticket just a couple days before he was to board the plane for St. Louis.

While the destination would have probably been 149th on his list of places to go, it was just what he needed. He had dug himself so deeply in a rut in New York and no one was there to take away the shovel.

There was a game the first night they arrived. After checking into a Holiday Inn, they headed to the Scottrade Center Stadium to yell and scream like a couple high school kids. Unfortunately, the Red Wings went down 2-3 to the Blues.

"They were off tonight, Billy. Osgood must have forgotten to wear his contacts. He's such a good goalie. He's only had three goals scored against him. Three times all year! And two of those games we won anyway."

“Wow! You’re really into this.”

“For some reason, hockey reminds me of being married.”

“I can understand that. I would think it’s something you might not want to be reminded of.”

“Yeah. Except we get to kick the other guy’s butt!”

“Mom. You are one of a kind.”

The next game was in six days. Billy and his mom spent the time seeing the sights in St. Louis, which turned out to be a more interesting city than Billy would have imagined.

Of course, they saw the Gateway Arch, which is hard *not* to see, since it towers more than six stories in a majestic parabolic arch over the Mississippi River.

Since his mom had rented a car, they drove out to Forest Park and nearly froze to death walking around the lakes and hiking paths. They went to Grant’s Farm, then next day did a tour of the Anheuser-Busch Brewery, where Billy learned what an exotic art and precise science it was to turn out some of the blandest beer on the planet.

And since it was Christmas, they went shopping. They agreed to not spend more than \$20 on one another, a pact which they both broke, then made all sorts of excuses why. Billy really got the best end of the deal, since it had just been his birthday and his mom decided to give him a belated b-day present as well. She bought him a top-of-the-line iPod and a \$99 gift certificate to buy music at the Apple Online music store.

“But mom. Nobody pays for music anymore. They steal it.”

“If everyone filled their underwear with sardines, would you do it?”

“If it made me sexy I would.”

Billy bought his mom beautiful soft furry earmuffs for Christmas. She was ecstatic.

“These are perfect, Billy. So fluffy and cuddly. These can double as a pet, since your father won’t allow animals in the house.”

“They’re already housebroken. It was the first thing I asked.”

They spent Christmas evening in their room listening to carols on the radio and eating room service food. They even toasted the holiday with a bottle of champagne.

The Red Wings came through in style on the second match up. Osgood was back in the net, made some spectacular saves, and didn’t give up a single goal. Detroit shut out St. Louis 5-0. The way she carried on, Billy thought his mom was going to burst a blood vessel. He had bruises on him from all of the surrogate body checks she landed on him from the next seat. He told her that her bony elbows should be registered as lethal weapons with law enforcement agencies wherever she went.

Parting at the airport with good old mom would presumably be sad under any circumstances. But this time was especially poignant. While there was no turning back for Billy — certainly he didn’t want to ever live in Detroit again, nor could he consider, especially as an adult, ever living under the same roof with his father — his mom still provided him with a kind of mom-shield against the random

harshness of the world, as she had done from his earliest days as a child. There was some unique comfort being held in those thin, frail arms, pressed against her breastless body, as they hugged and said their good-byes in the airport. It was a comfort he only experienced with her.

Maybe that's why it is almost universally reported that on the battlefield, dying men in their last desperate cries before the life drains out of their bodies, yell out for their mothers.

"Thanks, mom. You saved my life. This has been great."

"It's always so good seeing my big grown-up boy. We had fun now, didn't we?"

She reached in her purse and pulled out a small gift-wrapped package.

"If you ever are feeling like you're missing your old mom, here's a little something I wanted you to have to remind you of me."

He excitedly tore it open. It was a Red Wings souvenir hockey-jersey.

Billy smiled from ear-to-ear and hugged her tightly. She couldn't see the boulder-size tears in his eyes.

The public address system blared the announcement for the boarding of his plane. His flight was leaving first, hers about an our later from a nearby gate.

"There's your plane. Be nice to the stewardesses now. Some of them are very pretty girls, have you noticed?"

"Yeah, mom. I noticed. I'll try to be a *good boy*."

"You took the words right out of my mouth. I love you, Billy Boy."

"Love you too, mom."

Billy waved one last good-bye before disappearing down the passageway to board the plane.

He had no way of knowing. But this would be the last time he would ever see his mom alive.

Running on Empty

It felt good to get out of New York, even if it was just for a week.

Being gone for the last-minute Christmas shopping frenzy was especially fortuitous timing. Admittedly he saw some of the panic and desperation in the eyes of the St. Louis shoppers, as they frantically worked their way down their gift lists, the Christmas Eve deadline looming only a few days away. But holiday shopping in St. Louis was like a game of touch football, whereas in New York it was more like Wrestlemania.

Unfortunately, it was not even an hour after Billy got back into the city — literally right after he completed the subway ride from the airport and was popping back up to street level at 2nd Avenue — that the Big Apple funk again shrouded him in the monastic gloom of his misery.

He just couldn't deal with it, the faceless people, the callous anonymity, the hustle-bustle busywork of surviving, the rush-rush hurry-up-and-wait. All he could think about was getting into his flat, locking the door, pulling the drapes, and shutting it all out.

When he flipped on the lights, as if somehow they were attached directly to

the switch, he was flooded with thoughts of Natalie. The good, the bad, the beautiful, the ugly.

Like dominoes falling, one memory triggered the next and the next, and he was whipsawed through a montage of his nearly four years with her. He was tickled and punched at the same time, regaled then bludgeoned. The aggregate mauling causing him to choke on the stale air of his flat. His breathing became a shallow panting. He felt like an overheated dog with emphysema.

He stood up and tried to shake it off, as if he were trying to lose cockroaches which inexplicably were crawling all over him.

A hollow lump of deadness opened up inside of him, as he ached for what he had lost, despaired that it would never be regained. This had become an all too familiar feeling for quite some time, a wistful dull presence. But rebounding from the trip to St. Louis, it was back with a vengeance.

Billy was also feeling something else. Something which had never reared its ugly head before.

Billy was feeling rage. It was a rage not directed at Natalie herself. It was diffused through the entirety of the situation he found himself in. In fact, if it was directed at any one person, that person was himself.

Like a junkie long overdue for a fix, he rolled a joint. The baggie of sedatives sat in his drawer next to his bag of reefer, so in one smooth motion he popped a couple of Valiums.

The next four days he spent reading the same chapter of *The Da Vinci Code* over and over. Each time he got to the end, he concluded that it made no sense and he must have missed something. So he would start the same chapter again, with slightly less enthusiasm and greater impatience at the whole enterprise of reading a book.

New Years Eve, he spent watching the red ball over Times Square descend, as the countdown ushered in the new year, Eastern Standard Time. It had been a very brutal December, but the mass of warm bodies which numbered in the tens of thousands, kept all but his ears and nose from feeling the bitter midnight cold.

Being there was everything he had imagined it would be, but less. The less was him. He was a numb observer in a rowdy herd of dancing, shuffling, prodding, laughing, freezing loonies.

People were drunk, crazy, wild, loud, boisterous, full of the arbitrary cheer that comes with an institutionalized occasion for yelling down the frustrations, defeats, agonies, and general hopelessness of their lives, while believing for an evening that things were going turn around and be amazing from now on.

Billy didn't yell, scream, wave his hands in the air, or sing *Auld Lang Syne* with the largely tone deaf crowd, didn't even hug any of those in his immediate proximity in a random act of euphoric love.

He greeted the new year with the calm one would, on seeing a bus arrive on time. Then he went back to his apartment, flipped over his mattress, tossed the sheets and blankets haphazardly back on the bed, and went to sleep.

Candy reappeared on Billy's doorstep a month later. Friday February 1st, to be exact. In an eerie déjà vu, she showed up and took him to see Machines of Melanoma at the very same club he had first seen them, the Mercury Lounge.

At first glance, she was exactly the same. But something was different. Though she tried her best to hide it, Billy sensed as the evening went on, that under her layers of Candyesque flippancy and quirky fun, some body of pain now resided in her.

He knew better than to ask.

Just as they had on their original date, at the end of the evening they went their separate ways. No kiss. No hug. Just awkward good-byes.

There was one thing that struck Billy as particularly odd, simply because it was so mundane and Candy never seemed to have time for the silly particulars of life that monopolized most conversations everyone else had. It was something she said on their way out of the club.

"I'll be moving soon."

"Out of New York."

"No. Just to a new apartment. Time for a change."

Billy had never been to Candy's place. For all he knew, she lived in an barracks full of Mongolian gypsies. It seemed like an odd thing to mention.

"Let me know. I like to keep all of my records right up to date."

"I will. I know you're as punctilious as they come."

Candy came over two days later. Never one to let randomness wield the baton for very long, as soon as she walked through the door, she took control. She was all over Billy and they made love like they hadn't been alone together for several months. Of course, they hadn't.

With a rare but highly amenable nod to convention, they actually made it to his bed for their three-minute leap into the volcano of frenzied eroticism.

When they were done, she leaned up on one elbow and pressed the bed with her free hand.

"Did you flip the mattress?"

Billy laughed so hard, his stomach hurt.

"You are the most unique human being I have ever met."

"And you're not boring. So far anyway. How are you set for money?"

"You want to borrow five bucks?"

"At your interest rates? I don't think so. I just thought that if you needed some extra money, you might want to join Amethyst and I next week. She came up with a job at NYU but we need a guy. If you can't do it, I can always ask that bum who's taken up residence on the stairs outside."

"Which one works best for you? Just because we're friends, you don't have to give me preferential treatment."

"It's a close call. But you have a slight edge."

"Why is that?"

"You don't smell like a sewer."

After Candy left in the morning, something occurred to Billy.

It was astonishing how dramatically things abruptly flipped. When he was with Candy, things were suddenly pretty okay. Decent. Adequate. Tolerable.

When he wasn't ... it was what it unfortunately was.

The thing that always amazed him was how open and accepting she was.

Sure. She cut him no slack. Nothing got past her. She was forgivingly

unforgiving.

But she was there. Truly there *for* him. Totally right there *with* him.

Of course, sometimes she confused him. She seemed to blow hot and cold with no predictable pattern, rhyme or reason. Was that the way she was?

Or maybe that was just the way he read her. Or couldn't read her.

Really difficult to say. She was a wild card.

Right... *he* was one to talk!

That poor girl. Being around him had to be a constant 40 G whiplash, given *his* mood swings, temper tantrums, rocketing ascents to manic heights of autism, his plummeting dives into the abyss of dumb stupor, his hiding within the crazed but fleeting euphoria of the drugs and the booze, his suffering the ego-battering he too often subjected himself to.

But through it all, she was there.

Candy was a rock.

Very rarely would she get caught up in the siphoning asphyxiation of his backdraft. She never played into or fed his manic-depressive swings. Usually, she rode him right down the center, only bending to whatever self-generated breezes gently blew her along her own independent path.

Billy didn't know if he loved her.

He didn't know if she loved him.

It didn't seem relevant.

Are those things people really need to know? Why would someone want to know something like that? Why would anyone dare risk asking the question? They might not like the answer.

All that was certain was that when they were together, they were together.

Somehow it felt right. At least for now it did.

That could all change.

It probably would.

Which sucks.

But it was great to have her back.

Blood Simple

Billy took the job with Candy and Amethyst. They assured him it was easy money. Easy money was something he never turned away. With the money his mom had loaned him, he had enough to live for a couple months, maybe three if he stretched it. But this was \$100 for an hour's work.

Not bad.

He showed up right on time. Candy and Amethyst were waiting for him.

They stepped out of their clothes and up onto a small stage. More than forty eyes examined them from head to toe.

15 minutes passed. Only 45 more to go. He had to admit. This certainly was easy money.

He could just barely hear Amethyst and Candy, catching words and phrases.

They were whispering.

Amethyst: "Ohmigod... happened?"

Candy: "My brother ..."

Amethyst: "How? ... Christmas?"

Candy: "... hemophiliac. Internal bleeding."

The instructor cleared his throat loudly. "Quiet please."

Billy: "What are you saying?"

Candy: "Not now."

Amethyst: "... so sorry, Candy."

Candy: "It's weird ... eventually ..."

The instructor was at the back of the room but was getting impatient.
"Shhhh!!"

Billy: "This instructor is a tyrant."

Amethyst: "... your mom ... other brothers?"

Candy: "... hard to believe ... 27 ... it was ..."

Amethyst: "... anything? ... hospital ...?"

Billy: "Anytime you want to let me in on this is fine with me."

The instructor finally scurried over to them, folded his arms, and glared.

"PLEASE! Please be silent. We can hear you."

The voice of authority. Amazing who gets to be in charge these days.

What a twerp.

What Billy had signed on to was a modeling job. They were at the NYU Art Department's sculpture lab, offering themselves for preliminary sketches of what would ultimately be a larger-than-life bronze sculpture, a collective project of the twenty some students in the room at the time, all apparently in the advanced Fine Arts graduate program.

The three of them were completely naked. Thankfully, the room was a warm 72° Fahrenheit.

While Candy and Amethyst apparently couldn't care less, this was not especially comfortable for Billy. As a result of his priggish upbringing in the Midwest, he was still rather self-conscious about his body in general. And here he was exposing his reproductive organs! A little more than half of the students in the room were girls. It was small consolation that they seemed no more interested in him personally, than if they were looking at a window display at Macy's or a life-size cardboard cutout of a polar bear.

The working title for the sculpture was *The Genesis of Jealousy*. The diminutive instructor, who apparently was the mastermind of this particular group project, pretentiously referred to it as "the piece" — short for masterpiece.

After posing, Billy, Candy and Amethyst got dressed and lingered in the adjacent room within earshot, while the instructor explained that the inspiration for the work was complex. They heard something about an Ethan and Joel Coen movie, the Joni Mitchell song "Sex Kills", a reference to a rabbit boiling in a stew pot in the 80s film *Fatal Attraction*, and a perfume ad for some popular women's fragrance Billy had never heard of. There was no doubt in Billy's mind that, genius or not, the half-runt was full of shit.

Finally the instructor finished his pomposifying and as the class filed out, came over to them and handed them the vouchers they had been waiting for.

They were each \$100 richer.

He offered one haughty parting shot.

"You were noisy and rude. You really don't deserve this money, you know. We didn't need to hear about your petty little personal problems."

Billy wanted to kill the little rodent just to put him out of his self-important misery.

Candy just turned and quickly got out the door with Amethyst right behind her.

They got a ten-second head start. Billy finished tying his shoes and power-walked after them. As he turned the corner at the end of the hall, he found them sitting down on a bench. Candy was putting something back in her purse, maybe her cell phone. She looked up.

"Let's eat."

Food was the last thing on Billy's mind.

"Are you two going to tell me what you were talking about back there?"

Amethyst just glanced away, then looked to Candy to answer him.

"Not right now, Billy. I don't feel like talking about it."

Amethyst jumped in and ran interference for Candy.

"Hey Billy! Were you getting a boner back there? Your thingy looked to me like it was starting to point at that fat chick over by the two gay dudes. Or maybe it was pointing at them. They *were* kinda cute."

He knew when he was outgunned.

"Pizza? Chinese take-out?"

"I have been dying for some good goulash."

"Yeah! And a big plate of boiled cabbage with tons of salt."

"Candy. Amethyst. You are both freaks."

They caught the E train uptown and parked themselves at a very pricey Eastern European restaurant on East 53rd called Caterina's. Cokes were \$6, entrees \$20 and up. Billy was at risk of spending a good chunk of the money he had just earned, except Candy picked up the entire tab. The food was great but the three of them were about 1/3 the age of anyone else in the place, except for the waiters.

When they finished eating, Amethyst headed back to Soho in a taxi, Billy and Candy took the subway back to the East Village, then walked the few blocks to his flat.

Neither had much to say. Candy was especially quiet.

"Is anything bothering you, Candy?"

He was sitting on the bed. She came over next to him and looked intently into his eyes.

"Cabbage is a serotonin-enhancer."

Candy then took off Billy's socks, pants and underwear. She remained completely dressed.

She took him in her mouth and he climaxed almost instantly.

Candy pulled a blanket up from the lower part of the bed and lay down next to him, cuddling in his arms, shrouded by the warmth of his body and softness of the wool cover.

“Did you steal this blanket from the guy out front?”

“The Mayor of Avenue C? He gave it to me as a political bribe.”

“Shrewd politician.”

“He knows power when he sees it.”

“Listen. Something horrible happened at home. I’m not ready to talk about it. But I will. When I’m up to it.”

“You can talk to Am but you can’t talk to me?”

“You have enough to deal with. You are too important to me. This isn’t idle chit chat.”

“I have no doubt about that. It never is with you.”

She curled up closer. She couldn’t have gotten any closer.

Soon Billy could hear the slow shallow breathing of her immersion in the world of dreams.

For the brief moment before sleep took him to a parallel place, he wouldn’t have traded for anything or anybody in the entire world, the feeling of this strange girl curled in his arms.

Next morning, Candy was very upfront with him. She wouldn’t be around for a few days. She had a lot of things to take care of.

It ended up being nearly two weeks. She called a couple times but the conversations were matter-of-fact and very succinct. None of the usual flights of fancy and barrelhouse banter.

The third time she called, Candy seemed more relaxed and asked Billy if he could meet her at the Paradiso Café, a coffee house and deli that had recently become her favorite hang. It was in the West Village.

When Billy got there, she was waiting at a table in the furthest corner. Once Billy’s espresso and cheese croissant arrived at the table, she started right in on her story.

“While I was at home my older brother died. He had been dating a girl in town for about two months and her ex-boyfriend was jealous. He and a couple of his buddies decided to scare Travis — that’s my brother. I don’t think they meant to kill him. Travis was coming out of a movie theater with his new girlfriend. Her name is Diane and she is a very sweet girl, totally perfect for him. I really like her.”

Candy stopped for a minute and looked away. She fished some Kleenex out of her handbag. She was having difficulty keeping from completely losing it. Billy put his hand on hers and just kept quiet.

“They roughed Travis up. Nothing all that serious, if he had been like anyone else. What the assholes didn’t know is that he is a hemophiliac. To make a long story short, Travis had some serious internal bleeding, and before anything could be done about it, he died.”

The cheese croissant sat untouched and both of their coffee drinks were at room temperature before Billy broke the silence.

“You were really close to him? Your brother, I mean?”

“Close but far away. I haven’t lived there for over five years. But when we saw each other, it was always good. He was a great guy. He was great as an older brother. He always took care of me, even when he didn’t have to. I was his kid

sister and he thought it was his duty. It wasn't an easy job."

"I believe that."

They sat in silence again for quite a while. He had never seen Candy like this. Not even close. She hung her head and couldn't look Billy in the eyes. Her shoulders slumped from the enormous weight of her loss. She looked drained of all of the wild energy that was the Candy he had known until this moment.

"Are you ... I mean, it's hereditary, right? So do you have hemophilia?"

"Think about it, Billy. With all of these tattoos, if I did have it I'd look like a lawn sprinkler."

He tried not to laugh. It was a very Candy piece of imagery.

"You can laugh. It was supposed to be funny. Listen, Billy. I don't want to talk about this anymore. I don't even want to think about it. I mean, there's all of this obligation and these ridiculous expectations about mourning and working through your grief. I guess I'm supposed to show the world how lousy I feel. But the simple fact is that none of that will bring him back to life. So I am done with it. But you wanted to know. So now you know."

They paid and left.

A panhandler approached them as they stepped through the door.

"There are two cups of coffee and a croissant inside, if you get there before the busboy."

Light late-winter snow flurries started to fall. The weather was beginning to warm, so the flakes melted as soon as they touched the ground.

Billy was not one to be generous with his affection these days, but he took Candy's hand. It felt both strong and fragile. Maybe it was a reflection of the whole.

She looked pensive but some sixth sense told him she was not thinking of her brother.

Everyone deals with loss differently.

Billy sure had a lot to learn.

Maybe everything.

Spider Man

Billy and Candy were heading back to the East Village along Houston. She hadn't been to his flat for over a week. She was a very busy lady.

Doing what he didn't know. But then again, he never bothered to ask.

Though it was getting late in the afternoon, it was still light out. It had been a cloudless day, brisk but holding the promise of spring.

They headed up Bowery and went east on 2nd Street.

Right after turning the corner, as they came up to some steps beside a secured metal-grated garage door with giant padlocks at the base, they heard a gnarly old voice.

"Are you here for a spider?"

Beside the cement steps was a bum. He appeared to be sober and was sitting in the midst of several fishbowls. One of them sat directly in front of him on a cement block. It was so dirty it was impossible to see through the glass, the lip

had a large chunk broken off, and a crack went down one side almost to the base. A good bump would probably cleave it in half.

Leaning against the cement block under this bowl was a handwritten sign.

*Save the planet!
Free Spiders
Only 50¢.*

Billy's curiosity got the best of him. He walked over and tried to look into the bowl.

The old man quickly covered it with his hands, which looked as though they hadn't seen soap and water since Ronald Reagan was president.

"Your sign says the spiders are free. How can you charge 50 cents for them?"

"These spiders ... these spiders are freer than you and me. Freedom is never having to say you're sorry. Besides, the 50 cents is not for the spider. It's packaging and handling, shipping and taxation without representation. Some goes to the United Nations and MOMA to keep the dream alive."

"I see." Billy turned to Candy with a mock-enthusiastic grin. "What do you think, sweetie? Is this something we could use?"

The old man whipped his moth-eaten filthy wool hat off and shook it at Billy like it was a scepter or a sword.

"I'm on to you! You're just a smart-mouth punk who thinks he's smarter than an old man just because you floss your teeth and have no ring around the collar. But let me tell you something. Are you listening? Because you might learn a thing or two they didn't get around to teaching you at girls boarding school. You can't buy a spider any more than you can by a snowflake or a breath of air."

He put his hat back on and glared at Billy in disgust.

Candy sat down next to the old man. He didn't smell as bad as he looked.

"I want to meet one of your spiders."

The old man reached into a bowl behind him and took out two beautifully red, ripe Roma tomatoes. He held one up and handed the other one to her.

"Spiders are colorblind. These are like beach balls or small planets. They don't watch TV."

"So can I see one?"

Billy was glancing into all of the bowls, including the one right in front of the old man.

"I don't see any. Where are they?"

"They're not here. Home stays. Time shares. Adopt-a-spider-go-to-jail. Three strikes and you're out. I told you. I'm on to you! You can't have everything your way." He turned to Candy. "Why do you want a spider anyway? Are you lonely? Did your cat run away? You're not a Satanist, are you?"

"No, I'm not a Satanist."

The old man smiled at her sympathetically. His rheumy eyes seemed on the verge of spilling yellow mucous-laden tears.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. We can't disturb them now. They're on break. IWW

union rules. Even Roosevelt didn't see that one coming." He started laughing raucously, then shook his head as he let it hang against his chest, grinning away at the irony of his being an insider on all of the political machinations of the spider world.

He pointed at Billy.

"That's something else you don't understand." Pointing to all of the empty bowls around him. "They know I won't fuck with them. I won't turn them in just for the lousy reward money. We took the same loyalty oath, see. It's about love thy neighbor and don't fuck thy neighbor's wife. The Golden Rule. In case you didn't know."

The old man was silent for a long time.

All of a sudden, he perked up and noticed them, as if for the first time.

"I'm sorry. I didn't see you. Do you want some spiders? I can give you recipes. You're not vegetarian, are you?"

Candy stood up and came around next to Billy.

"Thanks, old man. We're all set. We better be going."

Billy reached in his pocket and held out a ten dollar bill. The old man just held up his hands and shook his head.

"I'm set for life. Money won't mean anything anyway. You can't take it with you."

Billy and Candy headed east across 1st Avenue. He finally spoke up.

"There but for the grace of God go I."

"Don't push your luck."

It had just gotten dark. As they approached Billy's Avenue C apartment, the caterwaul of two cats across the street announced some unresolved territorial dispute.

"I really love my loft."

"But you live in a basement."

"Can't I have my utopian fantasies?"

"You mean dystopian delusions. Am I the only sane person in this bloody city?" She held out her hand, palm up, empty. "How many spiders do you see?"

"I'm just trying to see the glass as half full."

"I'm seeing your cranium as half empty."

They entered. The stale air and some undefined stench caught in Candy's throat.

"Jesus, Billy, do you ever clean this place? It smells like the graveyard shift at a meatpacking house in Bosnia."

"Light some incense."

"How about lighting a drum of kerosene with a six-pack of heavy-duty highway flares and a flamethrower."

"You are OCD."

"If I were OCD, I wouldn't be anywhere near you. You are anathema to order, cleanliness, coherence, balance and sanity."

"But what about my bad points?"

"It's one thing to rise above the hungry addiction of consumerism, but to abandon all standards of hygiene and embrace chaos and filth with messianic

devotion is pathological.”

“Sounds to me like you want to fool around.”

“Alright alright. I admit it. The smell of rotting carcasses always puts me in a sexy mood. But take a shower first. Please!”

Billy came out with a towel wrapped around him. Candy was laying on the bed, naked as a newborn child, except for a few dozen tattoos. He dropped the towel and got onto the bed, savoring the view.

She put her arms up and raised her legs high. He would need no instruments to land this one. He aimed for the thin pink line below the Brazilian.

“The eagle has landed.”

“Oh my God! That feels *soooooo good*.”

Then it was over. It took two minutes tops.

“We’re getting good at this.”

“Did something happen?”

“You’re right. Hit the rewind button. I think I missed something.”

Billy started poking and tweaking her nipples and she curled into a ball giggling hysterically. When he got tired of tickling her, they both fell into a deep imperturbable sleep.

At some point late into the night the phone rang.

And rang and rang and rang.

Candy dreamed it was raining tiny Hindu prayer bells and they played melodically as they rippled through a shimmering glassine force field which held her body gracefully suspended.

Billy dreamed he was in a commercial jet which had lost power and was tumbling earthward towards total annihilation, with emergency alarms and passenger screams creating a cacophony of fear.

Just as the phone finally stopped ringing, they both woke up.

It was either a wrong number or a right number at the wrong time.

They lay quietly for a while. Faint echoes of bells trailed off in their shared subconscious.

When they eventually got up, Billy made coffee. Candy made breakfast. After the quick meal, Billy spent an inordinate amount of time in the bathroom trying to deal with the disfiguring effects of bed head. When he finally came out, he found Candy looking at a leaflet that came with his phone bill from Verizon Bell Atlantic, which listed the cornucopia of wonderful extra services he was being charged for, whether he knew it or not.

“You’ve got all sorts of features on this thing, Billy. Call waiting. Caller ID. Call ID block. Speed dialing. Call forwarding.”

“What’s Call ID block?”

“It’s so that people with caller ID can’t see who’s calling them.” She punched some numbers into the keypad. “There. That’s activated. Now you can make obscene calls without fear of prosecution. Let’s see. What else? Call waiting is already working. You don’t need call forwarding, since you don’t have a cell phone.”

Candy showed him how to enter phone numbers so that just pressing * and a digit, he could dial a call. She put her own number in as *1. Billy had her enter

his mom as *2.

“There you go. Welcome to the modern world.”

“I feel positively futuristic.”

Candy stood up, then leaned over and licked Billy’s right eye like she was getting the last dollop of whip cream from a spoon. He laughed and buried his face in both of his arms to avoid any more dog kisses. When he looked up, she was gone.

All morning he stared at the phone. Then shortly after 1 pm, he picked it up.

He entered Natalie’s private office line into the speed dialing menu as *666.

*666. “*Natalie Diamond. May I help you?*” Click. He hung up.

*666. “*Natalie Diamond. May I help you?*” Click.

*666. “*Natalie Diamond. May I help you?*” Click.

*666. “*Natalie Diamond. May I help you?*” Click.

*666. “*Natalie Diamond. May I help you?*” Click.

All afternoon. Every fifteen or twenty minutes.

At the end of the day, her phone just rang and rang.

The next morning, shortly after 9 am, he started again.

*666. “*Natalie Diamond. May I help you?*” Click.

*666. “*Natalie Diamond. May I help you?*” Click.

The fifth time, she was obviously angry. “*Who is this? This is pissing me off. Stop it!*”

He waited a while. After lunch, he started up again.

*666. “*Natalie Diamond. May I help you?*” Click.

*666. “*Natalie Diamond. May I help you?*” Click.

*666. “*Is this you, Billy? You childish fucking moron!*” Click.

That’s nice. She’s still thinking of him.

The next day he got a recorded message. *We’re sorry but this number is no longer in service. Please check the number and dial again. If you need further assistance ... blah blah blah.*

Billy lit a joint and sat looking at the blank wall across from him.

He couldn’t remember. Was Natalie afraid of spiders?

“The Man Who Loved Too Much”
Trilogy



Billy Green is bright, enigmatic, and lost. He spent his first 28 years trying to figure out who he is and where he fits in. His life has been a wild, unpredictable quest to attach himself to some reality he can grasp and live with. He grew up in an abysmal suburb of Detroit, escaped to university life at Cornell, got married and divorced before being thrown headlong and entirely unprepared into the insanity and social chaos of New York City.

Book 1: Archipelago

Amazon (Kindle): amzn.to/1tyIRiw
Amazon (Print): amzn.to/1z8F8aD
Barnes & Noble: bit.ly/ZDnQVO
Apple iBooks: apple.co/1nkebQx
Smashwords: bit.ly/1w62HOX

Book 2: Entendre

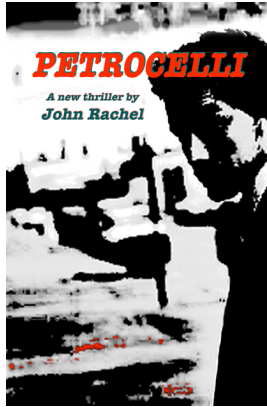
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Smashwords: bit.ly/1LJnRgJ

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“Petrocelli”



Lenny Petrocelli had it made until his gangland bosses decided to set him up as the fall guy for a child prostitution ring. This crime thriller confronts the horrifying and taboo topic of sex slavery and human bondage. There are over 35 million slaves in the world today. It's a multi-billion dollar business, subjecting females, many of them barely in their teens, to the worst kind of savage exploitation. If this gritty novel rings true, it's for good reason. Petrocelli is based on actual stories from the violent and gruesome world of human trafficking.

Amazon (Kindle): amzn.to/1XIWg2I

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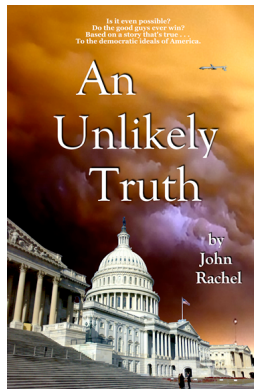
Apple iBook: apple.co/1S7P6F7

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“An Unlikely Truth”



In this political drama, a bright, young, idealistic, Green Party candidate in his bid for the congressional seat of a very conservative district in Ohio, teams with a beautiful, fiery African-American intern to combat the slick deceptions and ruthless tactics of a sweet-talking right wing incumbent.

Amazon (Kindle): amzn.to/1jetpiY

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Smashwords: bit.ly/1fIU3Mq

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“Blinders Keepers”



In this dark comedy, a young man who escapes his hopelessly hayseed home town in Missouri is mistakenly labeled a terrorist and must survive a manhunt by government security agencies, as the President of an America in chaos and collapse perpetrates an end-of-the-world hoax, in a desperate attempt to regain control and get himself re-elected.

Amazon (Kindle): amzn.to/1IiodLp

Amazon (Print): amzn.to/1Ohf9T7

Barnes & Noble: bit.ly/1mPC6a5

Apple iBook: apple.co/1JmzENg

Smashwords: bit.ly/1kb5Axx

Kobo: bit.ly/1OET2qg

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“11 - 11 - 11”



Noah was turning 23 and desperate to get out of town. Pulnick, Missouri had always been bland and soporific, but now it was now being invaded by white supremacist meth heads, plagued by an unprecedented crime wave, exploited by spiritualists and local politicians, and driven to hysteria by paranoid rumors that the world would end on November 11th.

Amazon (Kindle): amzn.to/1RQzupo

Amazon (Print): amzn.to/1krreNU

Barnes & Noble: bit.ly/1nlgS2Z

Apple iBook: apple.co/1JeJfTb

Smashwords: bit.ly/1PwjEN8

Kobo: bit.ly/1JIdpRQ

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“12 - 12 - 12”



Welcome to the parallel universe of "12-12-12". This not what actually happens during 2012. But what unfolds is not more implausible. Nor is it less implausible. It is dark satire, a portrayal of reality with healthy doses of surreality and comedy, spawned by the tragic absurdity of our times. One reviewer calls it "laugh-out-loud brain food for hungry minds."

Amazon (Kindle): amzn.to/1R75rYT

Amazon (Print): amzn.to/1UfOpHb

Barnes & Noble: bit.ly/1wD1izo

Apple iBook: apple.co/1R776xp

Smashwords: bit.ly/1NUVFNn

Kobo: bit.ly/1JeLNJg

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About the Author

John Rachel has a B.A. in Philosophy, has traveled extensively, been a songwriter and music producer, and is a bipolar humanist. He has spent his life trying to resolve the intrinsic clash between the metaphysical purity of Buddhism and the overwhelming appeal of narcissism.

In October of 2008, while visiting Japan, he completed his first novel, *From Thailand With Love*. It's a thriller about the trafficking of adolescent Asian girls for prostitution in America. Unfortunately, it was hijacked by an unscrupulous New York publisher and never released in its entirety.

In November of 2009, he completed his second novel, *The Man Who Loved Too Much*, written over ten months, as he lived in and traveled through Japan, China, Nepal, India Thailand, and Malaysia. It follows the convoluted life of a young man from age 4 to 28, as he tries to find his place in the world. The story is set in Detroit, upstate New York, and New York City. At 800+ pages, it is an epic. This encyclopedia of white trash pulp fiction plotlines has been split into three volumes, the novel you have just read being the last book of the series.

While writing his third and fourth novels in 2010 and 2011 — *11-11-11* and *12-12-12* — which track two years in the life of a young man, a hapless victim born in a hopelessly hayseed town in Bible-belt Missouri, the author hopped around between Japan, Taiwan, Indonesia, South Korea and the Philippines. Those two efforts evolved into the short and snappy adventure, *Blinders Keepers*, both as a novel and a screenplay. Combining plot elements from *11-11-11* and *12-12-12*, *Blinders Keepers* is social-political satire in the tradition of Jonathan Swift, Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller, but revved up and spit-shined to take on the historical new levels of absurdity and dysfunction of the 21st Century. *Blinders Keepers* was published as a novel in 2013, after which the author bounced between Japan, South Korea, the U.S., and nine countries in Europe.

He then became somewhat rooted in a small traditional farming village in Japan near Osaka. It was there, immediately after poking himself in the forehead with chopsticks, that he was inspired to plant soybeans and sweet potatoes in his small but promising vegetable garden, and to write *An Unlikely Truth*, published March of 2014. In this political drama, a bright, young, idealistic, Green Party candidate, in his bid for the congressional seat of a very conservative district in Ohio, teams with a beautiful, fiery African-American intern to combat the slick deceptions and ruthless tactics of a sweet-talking right wing incumbent.

A non-fiction delineation of the political strategy embedded in *An Unlikely Truth* appeared in June 2015 as *Candidate Contracts: Taking Back Our Democracy*. This manifesto offers a detailed, step-by-step plan for cleaning up the corruption in Washington DC, replacing the current crop of pay-for-play politicians with progressive, independent, minor-party candidates, who will be bound by legal contract when elected, to faithfully serve the interests of the voting public. Author Rachel expects the impact of this work will result in his being put on international no-fly lists and perhaps his becoming a target for drone assassination.

With the publication of the *The Man Who Loved Too Much* trilogy, he now has two more novels in the pipeline: *Love Connection*, a drug-trafficking love story set in Japan, and *The Last Giraffe*, an anthropological drama involving both the worship and devouring of giraffes. It unfolds in sub-Saharan Africa.

The author's last permanent residence in America was Portland, Oregon where he had a state-of-the-art ProTools recording studio, music production house, a radio promotion and music publishing company. He recorded and produced several artists in the Pacific Northwest, releasing and promoting their music on radio across America and overseas. John Rachel now lives in a quiet, traditional, rural Japanese community, where he sets his non-existent watch by the thrice-daily ringing of sonorous temple bells, at a local Shinto shrine.

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*You can follow John Rachel's adventures
and developing world view at:*

<http://jdrachel.com>

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*Since the open mind recognizes no borders, you are also
invited to join us in the ongoing dialogue about
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Reference to Steve Erhardt — a real person aka the Living Ken Doll — is purely a fictional prerogative and is done without the knowledge and consent of aforesaid. No malign or mockery intended. Steve Erhardt is a controversial public figure, who if anything I respect for his boldness and courage in the art of remaking himself into a preferred likeness. I'd be on the next surgical bed but I just can't afford it. But if this trilogy sells well, you never know. Maybe my next book will be by John Rachel, aka The Living Hemingway Doll.

The author quoted song lyrics as part of the story: "Blowin' in the Wind", Copyright 1962 Special Rider Music (SESAC) written and performed by Bob Dylan; "Lola" Copyright 1970 by ABKCO Music Inc, written by Ray Davies, performed by The Kinks.

Dialogue was quoted from the closing scene of the classic *The Wizard of Oz*; directed by Victor Fleming; starring Judy Garland, Frank Morgan, Ray Bolger, Bert Lahr, Jack Haley, Billie Burke; Copyright 1939 distributed by Metro Golden Mayer.

Eight adapted excerpts from *The Man Who Loved Too Much, Book 3: Oxymoron* have appeared as short stories in online and print publications: "Dr. Gender Bender" appeared in the San Francisco humor Magazine, Hobo Pancakes, May 2010; "Spider Man" was published in the New York-base magazine, Full of Crow, April 2010; "The Tea Lady of Kashmir" was published online at Troubador 21 (USA), May 2010; "Little Tantrums" and "Queen for a Day" were published in the American print magazine, Audience, June 2010; "Apocalypso" appeared Million Stories (USA), July 2010; "Guerilla Warfare" was published in the Australia print magazine, The Mutant Life, July 2010; and "I Swallowed Elton John's Sperm" appeared Million Stories (USA), May 2012.