BRET EASTON ELLIS
LUNAR PARK
PICADOR
The occupational hazard of making a spectacle of yourself, over the long haul, is that at some point you buy a ticket too.

—THOMAS MCGUANE, Panama

People who have made up their minds about a man do not like to have their opinions changed, to reverse their judgments on account of some new evidence or new arguments, and the man who tries to compel them to change their minds is at least wasting his time, and he may be asking for trouble.

—JOHN O’HARA

From the table of my memory
I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
That youth and observation copied there.

—Hamlet, I: v. 98
1. the beginnings

“You do an awfully good impression of yourself.”

This is the first line of Lunar Park and in its brevity and simplicity it was supposed to be a return to form, an echo, of the opening line from my debut novel, Less Than Zero.

“People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles.”

Since then the opening sentences of my novels—no matter how artfully composed—had become overly complicated and ornate, loaded down with a heavy, useless emphasis on minutiae.

My second novel, The Rules of Attraction, for example, began with this:

and it’s a story that might bore you but you don’t have to listen, she told me, because she always knew it was going to be like that, and it was, she thinks, her first year, or actually weekend, really a Friday, in September, at Camden, and this was three or four years ago, and she got so drunk that she ended up in bed, lost her virginity (late, she was eighteen) in Lorna Slavin’s room, because she was a Freshman and had a roommate and Lorna was, she remembers, a Senior or Junior and usually sometimes at her boyfriend’s place off-campus, to who she thought was a Sophomore Ceramics major but who was actually either some guy from N.Y.U., a film student, and up in New Hampshire just for The Dressed To Get Screwed party, or a townie.
The following is from my third novel, *American Psycho*.

**ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE** is scrawled in blood red lettering on the side of the Chemical Bank near the corner of Eleventh and First and is in print large enough to be seen from the backseat of the cab as it lurches forward in the traffic leaving Wall Street and just as Timothy Price notices the words a bus pulls up, the advertisement for *Les Misérables* on its side blocking his view, but Price who is with Pierce & Pierce and twenty-six doesn’t seem to care because he tells the driver he will give him five dollars to turn up the radio, “Be My Baby” on WYNN, and the driver, black, not American, does so.

This, from my fourth novel, *Glamorama*:

Specks—specks all over the third panel, see?—no, that one—the second one up from the floor and I wanted to point this out to someone yesterday but a photo shoot intervened and Yaki Nakamori or whatever the hell the designer’s name is—a master craftsman not—mistook me for someone else so I couldn’t register the complaint, but, gentlemen—and ladies—there they are: specks, annoying, tiny specks, and they don’t look accidental but like they were somehow done by a machine—so I don’t want a lot of description, just the story, streamlined, no frills, the lowdown: who, what, where, when and don’t leave out why, though I’m getting the distinct impression by the looks on your sorry faces that why won’t get answered—now, come on, goddamnit, what’s the story?

(*The Informers* was a short story collection published between *American Psycho* and *Glamorama* and since much of it was written while I was still in college—before the publication of *Less Than Zero*—it was an example of the same stripped-down minimalism.)

As anyone who had closely followed the progression of my career could glimpse—and if fiction inadvertently reveals a writer’s inner life—things were getting out of hand, resembling something that according to the *New York Times* had become “bizarrely complicated . . . bloated and trivial . . . hyped-up,” and I didn’t necessarily disagree. I wanted a return to that past simplicity. I was overwhelmed by my life, and those first sentences seemed reflections of what had gone wrong. It was time to get back to basics, and
though I hoped that one lean sentence—"You do an awfully good impression of yourself"—would start the process, I also realized that it was going to require more than a string of words to clear away the clutter and damage that had amassed around me. But it would be the beginning.

When I was a student at Camden College in New Hampshire I took a novel-writing tutorial and produced during the winter of 1983 a manuscript that eventually became Less Than Zero. It detailed a wealthy, alienated, sexually ambiguous young man's Christmas break from an eastern college in Los Angeles—more specifically Beverly Hills—and all the parties he wandered through and all the drugs he consumed and all the girls and boys he had sex with and all the friends he passively watched drift into addiction, prostitution and vast apathy; days were spent speeding toward the beach club with beautiful blondes in gleaming convertibles while high on Nembutal; nights were lost in VIP rooms at trendy clubs and snorting cocaine at the window tables of Spago. It was an indictment not only of a way of life I was familiar with but also—I thought rather grandly—of the Reagan eighties and, more indirectly, of Western civilization in the present moment. My teacher was convinced as well, and after some casual edits and revisions (I had written it quickly in an eight-week crystal-meth binge on the floor of my bedroom in L.A.) he submitted it to his agent and publisher, who both agreed to take it on (the publisher somewhat reluctantly—one member of the editorial board arguing, "If there’s an audience for a novel about coke-snorting, cock-sucking zombies, then by all means let’s publish the damn thing"), and I watched with a mixture of fear and fascination—laced with excitement—its transformation from a student assignment into a glossy hardcover that became a huge best seller and zeitgeist touchstone, was translated into twenty-five languages and made into a big-budget Hollywood movie, all within the space of about sixteen months. And in the early fall of 1985, just four months after publication, three things happened simultaneously: I became independently wealthy, I became insanely famous, and, most important, I escaped my father.

My father made the bulk of his money from highly speculative real estate deals, most of them during the Reagan years, and the freedom this money bought made him increasingly unstable. But my father had always been a problem—careless, abusive, alcoholic, vain, angry, paranoid—and even after my parents divorced when I was a teenager (my mother's
demand) his power and control continued to loom over the family (which also included two younger sisters) in ways that were all monetary (endless arguments between lawyers about alimony and child support). It was a mission of his, a crusade, to weaken us, to make us intensely aware of how we—not his behavior—were to blame for the fact that he was no longer wanted in our lives. He left the house in Sherman Oaks under protest and moved to Newport Beach and his rage continued to clash with our peaceful Southern California surroundings: the lazy days hanging by the pool beneath a relentlessly clear and sunny sky, the mindless wanderings through the Galeria, the endless driving with swaying palm trees guiding us toward our destinations, the easygoing conversations over a soundtrack of Fleetwood Mac and the Eagles—all the laid-back advantages of growing up in that time and place were considerably darkened by his invisible presence. This languid lifestyle, decadent and loose, never relaxed my father. He remained, always, locked in a kind of demented fury, no matter how mellow the surface circumstances of his life really were. And because of this the world was threatening to us in a vague and abstract way we couldn’t work ourselves out of—the map had disappeared, the compass had been smashed, we were lost. My sisters and I discovered a dark side to life at an unusually early age. We learned from our father’s behavior that the world lacked coherence, and that within this chaos people were doomed to failure, and these realizations clouded our every ambition. And so my father was the sole reason I fled to a college in New Hampshire rather than stay in L.A. with my girlfriend and enroll at USC like most of my classmates from the private school we attended in the San Fernando Valley suburbs ultimately did. That was my desperate plan. But it was too late. My father had blackened my perception of the world, and his sneering, sarcastic attitude toward everything had latched on to me. As much as I wanted to escape his influence, I couldn’t. It had soaked into me, shaped me into the man I was becoming. Whatever optimism I might have held on to had been swept away by the very nature of his being. The uselessness in thinking that escaping him physically would make a difference was so pathetic that I spent that first year at Camden paralyzed by anxiety and depression. The thing I resented most about my father was that the pain he inflicted on me—verbal and physical—was the reason I became a writer. (Added fact: he also beat our dog.)

Since he had no faith in my talent as a writer my father demanded that I attend business school at USC (my grades were poor but he had connections), even though I wanted to enroll somewhere as geographically distant...
from him as possible—an art school, I kept stressing over his roar, that offered no business courses. I found none in Maine so I chose Camden, a small liberal arts college nestled in the bucolic hills of northeastern New Hampshire. My father, typically enraged, refused to pay the tuition. However, my grandfather—who at the time was being sued by his son over a money matter so circuitous and complicated that I’m still not sure how or why it began—footed the bill. I’m fairly certain the reason my grandfather paid the outrageously expensive tuition had to do with the fact that it would upset my father greatly, which it did. When I started attending Camden in the fall of 1982, my father and I stopped speaking, which for me was a relief. This mutual silence prevailed until Less Than Zero was published and became a success. His negative, disapproving attitude about me then metamorphosed, by the popularity of the novel, into a curiously glowing acceptance that intensified my loathing for him even more. My father created me, criticized me, destroyed me and, then, after I reinvented myself and lurched back into being, became a proud, boastful dad who attempted to reenter my life, all within what seemed to me a matter of days. Again I felt defeated, even though I had gained control through my newfound independence. Not accepting phone calls or requests to visit—refusing any and all contact with him—gave me no pleasure; it didn’t vindicate anything. I had won the lottery yet still felt poor and needy. So I threw myself into the new life that was now offered, even though—being a savvy, jaded L.A. kid—I should have known better.

The novel was mistaken for autobiography (I had written three autobiographical novels—all unpublished—before Less Than Zero, so it was much more fiction-based and less a roman à clef than most first novels) and its sensational scenes (the snuff film, the gang rape of the twelve-year-old, the decomposing corpse in the alley, the murder at the drive-in) were taken from lurid rumors that whispered through the group I hung with in L.A. and not from anything experienced directly. But the press became extremely preoccupied with the book’s “shocking” content and especially with its style: very brief scenes written in a kind of controlled, cinematic haiku. The book was short and an easy read (you could consume this “piece of black candy”—New York Magazine—in a couple of hours) and because of its large type (and no chapter lasting more than a page or two) it became known as “the novel for the MTV generation” (courtesy of
USA Today) and I found myself being labeled by just about everyone as the voice of this new generation. The fact that I was only twenty-one and there were no other voices yet seemed not to matter. I was a sexy story and no one was interested in pointing out the paucity of other leaders. Besides being profiled in every magazine and newspaper that existed, I was interviewed on the Today show (for a record twelve minutes), on Good Morning America, by Barbara Walters, by Oprah Winfrey; I appeared on Letterman. William F. Buckley and I had a very lively conversation on Firing Line. For an entire week I introduced videos on MTV. Back at Camden I was engaged (briefly) to four different girls who hadn’t seemed particularly interested before the book was published. At the graduation party my father threw for me at The Carlyle the attendees included Madonna, Andy Warhol with Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, Molly Ringwald, John McEnroe, Ronald Reagan Jr., John-John Kennedy, the entire cast of St. Elmo’s Fire, various VJs and members of my massive fan club, which five Vassar seniors had started, with a film crew from 20/20 covering the event. Also attending was Jay McInerney, who had recently published a similar first novel, Bright Lights, Big City, about young people and drugs in New York, that made him an overnight sensation and my closest East Coast rival; one critic pointed out in one of the many articles comparing the two novels that if you substituted the word “chocolate” for “cocaine” both Less Than Zero and Bright Lights, Big City would be considered children’s books, and because we were photographed together so often people began to mix the two of us up—to simplify things the New York press simply referred to us as the Toxic Twins. After graduating from Camden I moved to New York and bought a condo in the same building both Cher and Tom Cruise lived in, a block from Union Square Park. And as the real world continued to melt away I became a founding member of something called the literary Brat Pack.

The Brat Pack was essentially a media-made package: all fake flash and punk and menace. It consisted of a small, trendy group of successful writers and editors, all under thirty, who simply hung out together at night, either at Nell’s or Tunnel or MK or Au Bar, and the New York as well as the national and international press became entranced. (Why? Well, according to Le Monde, “American fiction had never been this young and sexy.”) An updating of the movie-star Rat Pack from the late 1950s, it consisted of me (Frank Sinatra), the editor who discovered me (Morgan Entrekin in the Dean Martin role), the editor who discovered Jay (Gary Fisketjon/Peter
Lawford), hepcat Random House editor Erroll McDonald (Sammy Davis Jr.) and McInerney (the group’s Jerry Lewis). We even had our own Shirley MacLaine in the guise of Tama Janowitz, who had written a collection of short stories about cute, drug-addled hipsters trapped in Manhattan that stayed on the New York Times best seller list for what seemed like months. And we were in hyperdrive. Every door swung wide open. Everyone approached us with outstretched hands and flashing smiles. We did layouts in fashion magazines, the six of us lounging on couches in hip restaurants, wearing Armani suits and in suggestive poses. Rock stars who were admirers invited us backstage: Bono, Michael Stipe, Def Leppard, members of the E Street Band. It was always the A booth. It was always the front seat of the roller coaster. It was never “Let’s not get the bottle of Cristal.” It was never “Let’s not have dinner at Le Bernardin,” where our antics included food fights, hurling lobsters and hosing one another down with bottles of Dom Perignon until the unamused staff would ask us to vacate the premises. Since our editors were taking us out all the time on their limitless expense accounts, the publishing houses were actually paying for this debauchery. It was the beginning of a time when it was almost as if the novel itself didn’t matter anymore—publishing a shiny booklike object was simply an excuse for parties and glamour and good-looking authors reading finely honed minimalism to students who would listen rapt with slack-jawed admiration, thinking, I could do that, I could be them. But of course if you weren’t photogenic enough, the sad truth was you couldn’t. And if you were not a supporter of the Brat Pack, you simply had to accept us anyway. We were everywhere. There was no escaping our visages staring out at you from the pages of magazines and TV talk shows and scotch ads and posters on the sides of buses, in the tabloid gossip columns, our blank expressions caught in the dead glare of the camera flash, a hand holding the cigarette a fan was lighting. We had invaded the world.

And I was on display. Everything I did was written about. The paparazzi followed me constantly. A spilled drink in Nell’s suggested drunkenness in a Page Six item in the New York Post. Dining at Canal Bar with Judd Nelson and Robert Downey Jr., who costarred in the movie adaptation of Less Than Zero, suggested “bad behavior” (true, but still). An innocuous script meeting with Ally Sheedy over lunch at Palio was construed as a sexual relationship. But I had put myself out there—I hadn’t hidden—so what did I expect? I was doing Ray-Ban ads at twenty-two. I was posing for the covers of English magazines on a tennis court, on a throne, on the deck of my condo
in a purple robe. I threw lavish catered parties—sometimes complete with strippers—in my condo on a whim (“Because It’s Thursday!” one invitation read). I crashed a borrowed Ferrari in Southampton and its owner just smiled (for some reason I was naked). I attended three fairly exclusive orgies. I did guest spots as myself on *Family Ties* and *The Facts of Life* and *Melrose Place* and *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Central Park West.* I dined at the White House in the summer of 1986, the guest of Jeb and George W. Bush, both of whom were fans. My life was an unfolding parade made all the more magical by the constant materialization of cocaine, and if you wanted to hang out with me you had to carry at least an eight ball. And soon I became very adept at giving off the impression that I was listening to you when in fact I was dreaming about myself: my career, all the money I had made, the way my fame had blossomed and defined me, how recklessly the world allowed me to behave. Whenever I revisited L.A. over the Christmas holidays I usually chalked up four or five moving violations in the cream-colored 450 SL my father had handed down to me, but I lived in a place where the cops could be bought off, a place where you could drive at night without headlights, a place where you could snort coke while getting blown by the B-list actress, a place that allowed the three-day smack binge with the upcoming supermodel in the four-star hotel. It was a world that was quickly becoming a place with no boundaries. It was Dilaudid at noon. It was not talking to anyone in my immediate family for five months.

The two main events during the next phase of my life were the hurried publication of a second novel, *The Rules of Attraction,* and my affair with the actress Jayne Dennis. *The Rules of Attraction* was written during my senior year at Camden and detailed the sex lives of a small group of wealthy, alienated, sexually ambiguous students at a small New England liberal arts college (so like Camden itself that this is what I called the fictional university) during the height of the Reagan eighties. We followed them as they wandered from orgiastic party to orgiastic party, from one stranger’s bed to another, and the text catalogued all the drugs devoured, all the alcohol guzzled, how easily they drifted into abortions and vast apathy and skipping classes, and it was supposed to be an indictment of, well, really nothing, but at that point in my career I could have submitted the notes I had taken in my junior year Virginia Woolf course and would still have received the huge advance and copious amounts of
publicity. The book was also a best seller, though not as successful as *Less Than Zero*, and the press became even more fascinated with me, and by the decadence portrayed in the book and how it seemed to mirror my public lifestyle as well as the decade we were all trapped in. The book cemented my authority as the spokesman for this generation, and my fame grew in direct proportion to the number of copies the book sold. It all kept coming: the cases of champagne consumed, the suits Armani sent over, the cocktails in first class, the charting on various power lists, the court seats at Lakers games, the shopping after hours at Barneys, the groupies, the paternity suits, the restraining orders against “determined fans,” the first million, the second million, the third million. I was going to start my own line of furniture. I was going to have my own production company. And the spotlight’s white glare kept intensifying, especially when I started dating Jayne Dennis.

Jayne Dennis was a young model who had seamlessly made the transition to serious actress and had been steadily gaining recognition for her roles in a number of A-list projects. Our paths had crossed at various celebrity functions, and she had always been extremely flirtatious—but since everyone was flirting with me at that point in my life, her interest barely registered until she arrived at a Christmas party I threw in 1988 and basically hurled herself at me (I was that irresistible). At the after-party at Nell’s I found myself making out with her in one of the club’s front booths and then whisked her back to my suite at The Carlyle (it took the caterers two days to decorate the condo and three days to clean it up—there were five hundred guests—so I moved into a hotel the week of that party), where we had sex all night and then I had a plane to catch the next morning to L.A. for the holidays. When I returned to New York we officially became a high-profile couple. We could be seen at an Elton John AIDS benefit concert at Madison Square Garden, we were photographed at a Hampton’s polo match, we were interviewed by *Entertainment Tonight* on the red carpet at the Ziegfeld premiere of the new Eddie Murphy comedy, we sat in the front row at a Versace fashion show, paparazzi followed us to a friend’s villa in Nice. Though Jayne had fallen in love with me and wanted to get married, I was simply too preoccupied with myself and felt the relationship, if it kept running its course, would be doomed by summer. Besides her neediness and self-loathing, there were other insurmountable obstacles: namely drugs and, to a lesser extent, massive alcohol consumption; there were other girls, there were other boys; there was always another party to get lost in. Jayne and I broke up amiably in May of 1989 and kept in touch in a
sad/funny sort of way; there was a continuing wistfulness on her part and a high level of sexual interest on mine. But I needed my space. I needed to be alone. A woman wasn’t going to interfere with my creativity (plus, Jayne didn’t add anything to it). I had started a new novel that was beginning to demand most of my time.

What’s left to say about *American Psycho* that hasn’t already been said? And I feel no need to go into great detail about it here. For those who weren’t in the room at the time, here’s the CliffsNotes version: I wrote a novel about a young, wealthy, alienated Wall Street yuppie named Patrick Bateman who also happened to be a serial killer filled with vast apathy during the height of the Reagan eighties. The novel was pornographic and extremely violent, so much so that my publishers, Simon & Schuster, refused the book on grounds of taste, forfeiting a mid-six-figure advance. Sonny Mehta, the head of Knopf, snapped up the rights, and even before its publication the controversy and scandal the novel achieved was enormous. I did no press because it was pointless—my voice would have been drowned out by all the indignant wailing. The book was accused of introducing serial killer chic to the nation. It was reviewed in the *New York Times*, three months before publication, under the headline “Don’t Buy This Book.” It was the subject of a 10,000-word essay by Norman Mailer in *Vanity Fair* (“the first novel in years to take on deep, dark, Dostoyevskian themes—how one wishes this writer was without talent!”). It was the object of scornful editorials, there were debates on CNN, there was a feminist boycott by the National Organization of Women and the obligatory death threats (a tour was canceled because of them). PEN and the Authors Guild refused to come to my rescue. I was vilified even though the book sold millions of copies and raised the fame quotient so high that my name became as recognizable as most movie stars’ or athletes’. I was taken seriously. I was a joke. I was avant-garde. I was a traditionalist. I was underrated. I was overrated. I was innocent. I was partly guilty. I had orchestrated the controversy. I was incapable of orchestrating anything. I was considered the most misogynist American writer in existence. I was a victim of the burgeoning culture of the politically correct. The debates raged on and on, and not even the Gulf War in the spring of 1991 could distract the public’s fear and worry and fascination from Patrick Bateman and his twisted life. I made more money than I knew what to do with. It was the year of being hated.
What I didn’t—and couldn’t—tell anyone was that writing the book had been an extremely disturbing experience. That even though I had planned to base Patrick Bateman on my father, someone—something—else took over and caused this new character to be my only reference point during the three years it took to complete the novel. What I didn’t tell anyone was that the book was written mostly at night when the spirit of this madman would visit, sometimes waking me from a deep, Xanax-induced sleep. When I realized, to my horror, what this character wanted from me, I kept resisting, but the novel forced itself to be written. I would often black out for hours at a time only to realize that another ten pages had been scrawled out. My point—and I’m not quite sure how else to put this—is that the book wanted to be written by someone else. It wrote itself, and didn’t care how I felt about it. I would fearfully watch my hand as the pen swept across the yellow legal pads I did the first draft on. I was repulsed by this creation and wanted to take no credit for it—Patrick Bateman wanted the credit. And once the book was published, it almost seemed as if he was relieved and, more disgustingly, satisfied. He stopped appearing after midnight gleefully haunting my dreams, and I could finally relax and quit bracing myself for his nocturnal arrivals. But even years later I couldn’t look at the book, let alone touch it or reread it—there was something, well, evil about it. My father never said anything to me about American Psycho. Though oddly enough, after reading half of it that spring, he sent my mother a copy of Newsweek with the cover that asked, over the angelic face of a baby, “Is Your Child Gay?” unaccompanied by any kind of note or explanation.

The death of my father occurred in August of 1992. At the time I was doing the Hamptons in a $20,000-a-month cottage on the beach in Wainscott, where I was trying to work through my writer’s block while preparing for weekend guests (Ron Galotti, Campion Platt, Susan Minot, my Italian publisher, and McInerney), ordering the forty-dollar plum tart from the specialty bakery in East Hampton and picking up the two cases of Domaines Ott. I was trying to stay sober but I’d started opening bottles of chardonnay at ten in the morning, and if I’d drunk everything the night before, I would sit in the Porsche I’d leased for the summer in a Bridgehampton parking lot waiting for the liquor store to open, usually sharing a cigarette with Peter Maas, who was waiting there too. I had just broken up with a model over a bizarre argument while we were barbecuing
mackerel—she complained about the drinking, the spacing out, the exhibitionism, the gay thing, my weight gain, the paranoia. But it was the summer of Jeffrey Dahmer, the infamous homosexual/cannibal/serial killer from Wisconsin, and I became positive that he had been under the influence of American Psycho, since his crimes were just as gruesome and horrific as Patrick Bateman’s. And since there had been a serial killer in of all fucking places Toronto, for Christ’s sake, who had read the book and based two of his murders on scenes from it, I made a number of frantic, drunken phone calls to my agent at ICM as well as to my publicists at Knopf to make sure this wasn’t the case (it wasn’t). And yes, it was true, I had gained forty pounds—I was so sunburned and fat that if you had drawn a face on a giant pink marshmallow and plopped it in front of a laptop, you could not have told the difference between the two of us. And, of course, being this out of shape, I was prone to skinny-dipping in the Atlantic just fifty yards from my $20,000-a-month cottage, and yeah, I had also developed a minor crush on a teenage guy who worked at Loaves and Fishes. So Trisha’s leaving me was semuunderstandable. Calling me a “f***ing lunatic” and speeding away in that leased Porsche was not.

And then the summer was interrupted by a phone call in the middle of the night. He was found naked by the twenty-two-year-old girlfriend on the bathroom floor of his empty house in Newport Beach. That was all we knew. I had no idea what to do, who to call, how to cope. I collapsed into shock. Someone had to remove me from that cottage and get me back to California. There was eventually only one person who could do all this for me—or, more pointedly, would. So Jayne left the set of a movie in Pennsylvania she was costarring in with Keanu Reeves and made plane reservations on MGM Grand and dragged my shivering hulk out of the Hamptons and flew to L.A. with me—all within twenty hours of hearing about my father’s death. And that night, at the house in Sherman Oaks that I grew up in, drunk and terrified, I brutally made love to her in my childhood room while we both wept. Jayne returned the next day to the set in Pennsylvania. Keanu sent me flowers.

My father had made me trustee of his estate, which was worthless, and he also owed millions in back taxes, so there was a protracted legal battle with the IRS (they could not understand how someone who had made $20 million in the last six years of his life had spent it all—but this was before we found out about the rented Learjet and all the bad art) that kept me in Los Angeles for several months, locked in an office in Century City.
with three lawyers and half a dozen accountants until all the financial matters were cleared up. In the end I was left with two Patek Philippe watches and a boxful of oversized Armani suits, as well as a monumental relief that he was gone. (My mother and sisters—nothing.) The autopsy revealed that he had suffered a massive stroke at 2:40 a.m., though the coroner was mystified by certain irregularities. No one wanted to pursue these irregularities and he was cremated immediately. His ashes were put into a bag—even though his (invalid) will stated that he wanted his children to spread them at sea off the coast of Cabo San Lucas, where he vacationed frequently—and we stored the ashes in a safe-deposit box in a Bank of America on Ventura Boulevard next to a dilapidated McDonald’s. When I brought some of the Armani suits to a tailor to be altered (I had dropped all the weight I had gained that summer in a matter of weeks) I was revolted to discover that most of the inseams in the crotch of the trousers were stained with blood, which we later found out was the result of a botched penile implant he underwent in Minneapolis. My father, in his last years, due to the toxic mix of diabetes and alcoholism, had become impotent. I left the suits with the tailor and drove back to Sherman Oaks in tears, screaming while punching the roof of the Mercedes as I swerved recklessly through the canyons.

And when I returned to New York, I was told by Jayne that she was pregnant and that she intended to keep the child and that I was the father. I begged her to have an abortion. (“Change it! Fix it! Do something!” I screamed. “I can’t be doing this! I’ll be dead in two years! Don’t look at me like I’m crazy!”) Children had voices, they wanted to explain themselves, they wanted to tell you where everything was—and I could easily do without witnessing these special skills. I had already seen what I wanted and it did not involve children. Like all single men the first priority was my career. I had a fantasy bachelor’s life and wanted to keep it. I raged at Jayne, confronted her with entrapment, insisted it wasn’t mine. But she said she expected as much from me and had the child prematurely the following March at Cedars-Sinai, in L.A., where she was now living. I saw the child once during its first year—Jayne brought him over to the condo on 13th Street in a pathetic attempt at bonding when she was in town for the premiere of the movie she had made with Keanu Reeves the previous summer. She had named him Robert—Robby. Again I raged at her and insisted the child wasn’t mine. She asked, “Then who the hell do you think the father is?” I immediately made a connection and pounced on it. “Keanu Reeves!” I shouted. (Keanu had been a friend of mine when he was initially
cast in *Less Than Zero*, but he was replaced by Andrew McCarthy when the studio producing the movie—Twentieth Century–Fox—scored a hit in the spring of 1987 with *Mannequin*, a low-budget sleeper which starred McCarthy, and was produced, ironically, by the father of the girl the character Blair—the heroine of *Less Than Zero*—was based on; my world was that small.) I threatened to sue Jayne if she asked for child support. Since I refused to participate in any testing, she hired a lawyer. I hired a lawyer. Her lawyer argued that “the child bears a striking resemblance to Mr. Ellis,” while my lawyer countered, reluctantly, at my urging, with “said child bears a striking resemblance to a certain Mr. Keanu Reeves!” (the exclamation point being my idea; blowing my relationship with Keanu because of this, not my idea). Tests I was legally obliged to undergo proved that I was the father, but I claimed that Jayne had misrepresented the facts when she said she was using contraception. “Ms. Dennis and Mr. Ellis were in a non-exclusive relationship,” my lawyer argued. “Regardless of Mr. Ellis being the father, it is her choice to be a single mother.” I learned in cases such as these that ejaculation was the legal point of no return. But one morning, after a particularly acrimonious phone call between my lawyer and Jayne’s, Marty hung up the phone, stunned, and looked at me. Jayne had given up. She no longer expected any child support and promptly dropped her lawsuit. It was at that moment in my lawyer’s office at One World Trade Center that I realized she had named the child after my father, but when I confronted her about it later that day, after we had tentatively forgiven each other, she swore it had never occurred to her. (Which I still do not believe, and which I am certain is the reason that the following events in *Lunar Park* happened—it was the catalyst.) What else? Her parents hated me. Even after it was proven that I was the father, Jayne’s last name remained on the birth certificate. I started wearing Hawaiian shirts and smoking cigars. Jayne had another child five years later—a girl named Sarah—and again the relationship with the father did not work out. (I knew the guy vaguely—a famous music executive in L.A.; he was a nice guy.) In the end, Jayne seemed practical and maternal and stable. We amiably kept in touch. She was still in love with me. I moved on.

Jayne always demanded Robby’s name not be connected with mine in any of the press I did and of course I agreed, but in August of 1994, when *Vanity Fair* assigned a profile to run when Knopf published *The Informers*, that collection of short stories I had written when still at Camden, the reporter suggested who Robby’s father might be and in his first draft—
which ICM suspiciously got a peek at—cited a “reliable source” as saying that Bret Easton Ellis was in fact Robby’s dad. I relayed this information to Jayne, who called my agent, Binky Urban, and the head of Knopf, Sonny Mehta, to demand that this “fact” be excised, and Graydon Carter—the editor of Vanity Fair and also a friend—agreed to cut it, much to the chagrin of the reporter who had “endured” a week with me in Richmond, Virginia, where I supposedly was hiding out at a friend’s house. Actually, I was secretly attending the Canyon Ranch that had recently opened there to get in shape for the brief book tour I’d promised to do for Knopf to support The Informers. That information never made it into the article, either.

Very few people (close friends included) knew anything about this, my secret son, and—except for Jay McInerney and my editor, Gary Fisketjon, both of whom Robby met when Jayne and I attended the wedding of a mutual friend in Nashville—no one I was acquainted with had ever seen him, including my mother and my sisters. At that wedding in Nashville, Jayne informed me that Robby had been asking where his father was, why his dad wasn’t living with them, why he never came to visit. Supposedly there were an increasing number of tearful outbursts and long silences; there was confusion and the demand of proof; there were anxieties, irrational fears, attachment disorders, tantrums at school. He wouldn’t let people touch him. Yet at the wedding in Nashville he had instinctively reached for my hand—I was still a stranger, his mother’s friend, nobody—to show me a lizard he thought he had seen behind a hedge outside the hotel where a large number of the wedding guests were staying. This was something I pretended didn’t bother me, and I tried to refrain from mentioning him at the thousands of cocktail parties I attended during the following years. But at that moment in the evening when someone brought out the cocaine (which had admittedly become nightly by that point), fragments of this hidden life would tumble teasingly from my mouth. Though when I noticed the saddened, shocked expressions of people who sensed the yearning behind the mask, I would quickly shut up and offer my new mantra—“I’m kidding, I’m just kidding”—and then I would reintroduce whatever new girl I was dating to people she had known for years. The girl would look up from a mirror piled high with cocaine and stare at me wonderingly, shudder and then lean back down, causing another line to disappear through a tightly rolled twenty-dollar bill. The wedding—after Robby took my hand for the first time—was the beginning. This was the moment when the son suddenly became real to the father. It was also the first year I spent close to
on drugs. Money that—what?—could have gone to Robby, I suppose. But Jayne was commanding $4 to $5 million per picture, and I was high all the time, so it stopped bothering me.

But a lot of people thought I was gay so they would soon forget that Bret Easton Ellis had mentioned—raving, coked-up, sucking back another Stoli—that he had fathered a child. The gay thing being the outcome of a drunken British interview I was doing to promote the BBC documentary about my life thus far at thirty-three, its title taken from American Psycho’s last line: This Is Not an Exit: The Bret Easton Ellis Story (the fame, the excess, the falloff, the dysfunction, the heartbeat, the DUI, the shoplifting incident, the arrest in Washington Square Park, the comeback, walking tiredly through a gym in slow motion while Radiohead’s “Creep” blasted over the soundtrack). Noting causally that I appeared “rather effete” in many of the clips, and instead of asking if I was on drugs, the reporter wondered if I was a homosexual. And I said, “Yeah, you bet I am—sure!” adding what I thought to be a jaunty and overtly sarcastic remark about coming out of the closet: “Thank God!” I shouted. “Someone has finally outed me!” I had told countless interviewers about sexually experimenting with men—and went into explicit detail about the collegiate threesomes I had at Camden in a Rolling Stone profile—but this time it struck a nerve. Paul Bogaards, my publicist at Knopf, actually called me a “potty-mouthed butt pirate” after reading the piece in the Independent, while relishing the storm of controversy this admission caused, not to mention the increased sales of my backlist. The creator of Patrick Bateman, author of American Psycho, the most misogynistic novel ever written, was actually—gasp!—a homosexual?!? And the gay thing sort of stuck. After that interview appeared I was even named one of the Advocate’s 100 Most Interesting Gay People of the year, which drove my legitimately gay friends nuts and prompted confused, tearful phone calls from Jayne. But I was just being “rambunctious.” I was just being “prankster.” I was just being “Bret.” Over the years photos of me in a Jacuzzi at the Playboy Mansion (I was a regular when I was in L.A.) kept appearing in that magazine’s “Hanging with Hef” page, so there was “consternation” about my sexuality. The National Enquirer said I was dating Julianna Margulies or Christy Turlington or Marina Rust. They said I was dating Candace Bushnell, Rupert Everett, Donna Tartt, Sherry Stringfield. Supposedly I was dating George Michael. I was even dating both Diane Von Furstenberg and Barry Diller. I wasn’t straight, I wasn’t gay, I wasn’t bi, I didn’t know what I was. But it was all my fault, and I enjoyed the fact that
people were actually interested in who I was sleeping with. Did it matter? I was a mystery, an enigma, and that was what mattered—that’s what sold books, that’s what made me even more famous. Propaganda designated to enhance the already very chic image of author as handsome young playboy.

On heroin I thought everything I did was innocent and full of love and I had a yearning to bond with humanity and I was relaxed and serene and focused and I was frank and I was caring and I signed so many autographs and made so many new friends (who dwindled away, who didn’t make it). At the time I discovered dope I also started the decade-long process (the nineties) of outlining, writing and promoting a 500-page novel called Glamorama, about an international terrorist ring using the fashion world as a cover. And the book promised—predictably—to make me a multimillionaire again and even more famous. But I had to do a world tour. This is what I promised when I signed the contracts; this was what was required of me to become the multimillionaire again; this was what ICM insisted on so they could collect the commissions from the multimillionaire. But I was heavily into smack and the sixteen-month-long tour was considered by the publishing house to be a potentially “precarious” situation, since I was, according to Sonny Mehta, “kind of high all the time.” But they relented. They needed me to do the tour to help recoup the massive advance they’d laid out. (I told them to send Jay McInerney in my place—no one could tell the difference, I argued, plus I was positive Jay would actually do it. Nobody at Knopf thought this was even vaguely feasible.) Besides, I wanted to be that multimillionaire again, so I promised them I was clean—and for a little while I was. An internist they sent me to was convinced I would need a new liver by the time I was forty if I wasn’t careful, which helped. But not enough.

To make sure I stayed drug-free during the first leg of the Glamorama tour, Knopf hired a Jamaican bodyguard to keep an eye on me. Sometimes he was easy to elude; other times he was not. Like many esteemed (albeit sloppy) drug users, I usually had cocaine powder all over my jackets when I came out of bathroom stalls, dusting my lapels, dotting itself in chunks on the trousers of my new Cerruti suits so at times it was noticeable that I wasn’t entirely clean yet, which eventually led to daily searches by Terence, who would find the packets of meth and coke and dope lodged in my Armani overcoats, which he then sent out for dry cleaning. And then there were the
more serious side effects of doing drugs on a long, exhausting tour: the seizure in Raleigh and the life-threatening coma in St. Louis. Before long Terence just didn’t care anymore (“Mon, if you wanna do de dope, do de dope,” Terence tiredly told me as he fingered a dreadlock. “Terence don wanna know. Terence? He tired, mon.”) and soon I was doing bumps every ten minutes during interviews in a hotel bar in Cincinnati while guzzling double cosmopolitans at two in the afternoon. I was smuggling propane torches and large quantities of crack onto Delta flights. I overdosed in a bathtub in Seattle (I had technically died for three minutes in the Sorrento). And that was when the real worry began settling in. If the increasing number of handlers in each city couldn’t find me by lunch they were instructed by my publishers to get the house detective of whatever hotel I was staying at to unlock the door—and if the chain was up or I’d wedged a chair under the handle, they were instructed to “kick the fucker in”—to make sure I was still alive, and of course I was always still alive (literally, if not figuratively) but so wasted that PR reps would have to piggyback me from limousine to radio station to bookstore, where I would commence with my reading while sitting slumped in a chair, mumbling into a microphone, while a bookstore clerk nervously stood close by, ready to snap her fingers in front of my face if I zoned out (and sometimes during the signings they held my hand, guiding me to a recognizable signature when all I wanted to sign was an X). And if drugs were unavailable I became less committed to the cause. For example, since a dealer I knew in Denver had been—unbeknownst to me, before my arrival—stabbed to death in the head with a screwdriver I had to cancel an appearance at the Tattered Cover due to lack of dope. (I escaped the Brown Palace and was found on the front lawn of another dealer’s condo, moaning, my shoes and wallet stolen, my pants around my ankles.) Without drugs I couldn’t take showers because I was afraid of what might come out of the showerhead. Occasionally a book signing groupie who’d hinted she had drugs was dragged back to my hotel room and would attempt to revive me with dope and oral sex (which required a lot of patience on the groupie’s part). “It only takes a week to come off heroin,” one of these girls said hopefully while trying to gnaw her own arm off after she realized I had done all six bags of her smack. Without drugs I became convinced that a bookstore owner in Baltimore was in fact a mountain lion. If that was happening how could I endure the six-hour flight to Portland sober? My solution? Find more drugs. And so I kept scoring dope and continued to nod off during interviews in hotel bars. I passed out on planes, lying sprawled and unconscious
in first class before being wheelchaired through airports with an airline attendant by my side to keep me from sliding out. “Food poisoning,” the press was told by Paul Bogaards, now the head of publicity at Knopf. “He was poisoned by . . . um . . . y’know, food.”

And the tour roared on.

I woke up in Milan. I woke up in Singapore. I woke up in Moscow. I woke up in Helsinki. I woke up in Cologne. I woke up in various cities along the eastern seaboard. I woke up cradling a bottle of tequila in a white limo with bullhorns attached to its front fender as it raced across Texas. “Why did Bret miss the reading?” Paul Bogaards was constantly asked by the press. After a pause Paul would answer with his now customary vagueness. “Um, fatigue . . .” A new tack: “Why did Bret postpone this whole leg of the tour?” Another long pause before “Um, allergies.” Then a longer pause before the confused journalist tentatively mentioned, “But it’s January, Mr. Bogaards.” Finally, after another drawn-out pause on Bogaards’s part, in a small voice: “Fatigue . . .” This was followed by yet another very long pause and then in barely a whisper: “Food poisoning.” But people were making so much money (there was enough pornography and dismemberment to appease my fan base so the book was on just about every best seller list despite reviews that usually ended with the word “Yuck”) that schedules were inevitably readjusted, because if they weren’t my publisher would suffer huge financial losses. Everything about my career was now measured in economics, and giant bouquets of flowers had to be sent to my hotel suites in order to soothe my “insecurity rages.” Every hotel on the Glamorama world tour was required to provide “ten votive candles, a box of chewable vitamin-C tablets, an assortment of Ricola throat lozenges, fresh gingerroot, three large bags of Cool Ranch Doritos, a chilled bottle of Cristal, and an unlisted outgoing-only phone line,” and at all readings the lights above the podium had to be “orange-tinted” because this would bring out the darkness of my salon-induced tan. If these contractual demands weren’t met the fine would be split between Knopf and myself. No one said being a Bret Easton Ellis fan was easy.

An actual “drug cop” was hired for the second U.S. tour; somehow during all of this the paperback had been published (I had been on the road that long). Terence had slipped out of the picture months ago and a fresh-faced young woman—“motivational helper” or “celebrity babysitter” or “sober companion,” or whatever—was now on hand to basically make sure I didn’t snort heroin before the readings. But of course she was
hired to protect my publisher, not me. They didn’t really care about the underlying reasons of my addiction (but then neither did I) and were only interested in the amount of book sales the tour was generating. I thought I was “fragile yet functioning,” but according to memos the drug cop e-mailed to Knopf’s publicity department from the road, I was most decidedly not functioning.

E-mail memo #6: “15 miles southwest of Detroit writer was found hiding in back of stalled van on the median of a divided highway, picking at nonexistent scabs.”

E-mail memo #9: “Somehow writer has been teargassed at anti-globalization demonstration in Chicago.”

E-mail memo #13: “Berkeley; angry drug dealer was found choking writer due to ‘lack of payment’ in alley behind Barnes & Noble.”

E-mail memo #18: “Cleveland; writer slept until three p.m., missing all morning and lunch interviews; was then found ‘pigging out on junk food’ until compelled to ‘throw up.’ Also witnessed standing in front of hotel mirror sobbing ‘I’m getting so old.’ ”

E-mail memo #27: “Santa Fe; writer allegedly encouraged a Doberman pinscher to perform cunnilingus on unconscious groupie and when said animal failed to show interest in said groupie writer punched said animal in head and was severely bitten.”

E-mail memo #34: “Miami Book Fair; writer locked himself in bookstore bathroom repeatedly yelling at concerned employees to ‘Go away!’ When writer emerged an hour later he started to ‘freak out’ again. ‘I have a snake on me!’ writer screamed. ‘It’s biting me! It’s IN MY MOUTH!’ Writer was dragged to a waiting squad car while holding on to bewildered young yeshiva student attending the reading—whom writer continuously fondled and groped—until ambulance arrived. His eyes rolling back into his head, writer’s last words—shouted—before being driven off were quote ‘I am keeping the Jew-boy’ unquote.”

Paul Bogaards would respond with his own e-mails, such as: “I don’t care if you have to stick a broom up writer’s ass to get him upright and onstage—Just Do It.” I felt as if I had been hijacked. The tour seemed so long and monstrously unfair. I kept fainting from the endless pressure of it all. Wellbutrin helped me cope, along with my refusal to admit anything was wrong.
My handler was now calling the tour “a legitimately traumatic experience.” When I countered with “It’s an escapade!” she snapped back, “You need to hit rock bottom.” But it’s a difficult thing to hit rock bottom when you are making close to $3 million a year.

The reviews of my readings did not vary: “Rambling, unfocused and self-obsessed, Ellis buried the night under the weight of so much gibberish that all his appearance offered was the experience of seeing a celebrity author unravel” was not an atypical critical response. Because of the Internet, word raced through cyberspace of my “bedraggled” and “unintentionally humorous” signings, and this made people buy books. It put asses in all those folding chairs at the readings the publisher had set up, which ended up being massive affairs because I was radiating the numb, burned-out cool so popular during that particular moment in the culture. But the desire to erase myself was too great—it was winning at a game in which there were no winners. I had become so malnourished that in the middle of a reading in Philadelphia (where I had thrown the book aside and started ranting about my father) a front tooth came loose.

I was exhausted by the nonstop barrage of press (and my duplicity and the truths I hid) and after the premiere of the movie version of American Psycho—which is what the sixteen-month Glamorama world tour was heading for, what it was culminating toward—I realized that if I wanted to live again (i.e., not die) I had to flee New York. I was that burned out. A weeklong coke and heroin binge began in the limo during the drive to the premiere at the Sony Theater on Broadway and 68th and continued into the long night of parties that started at the Cerruti store on Madison (they had supplied the movie’s fashions), moved downtown to Pop, then danced itself to Spa and then dragged itself into my condo on 13th Street, where the cast members and their various agents and PR reps and DJs and other notable members of young Hollywood boogied until the building’s superintendent arrived the following morning and demanded I kick everyone out due to the intolerable noise level, even though, high and reeking of vodka and base, I tried bribing him with a roll of hundreds. After all that, I lay alone in bed for the next seven days, watching porn DVDs with the sound off and snorting maybe forty bags of heroin, a blue plastic bucket that I vomited into continually by my side, and telling myself that the lack of respect from the critical community was what hurt so much and why I had to drug myself away from the pain. I just lay back and kept waiting for the tawdry end of the incendiary career.
The following week there was a useless stint at the Exodus Clinic in Marina del Ray (where I was diagnosed with something called “acquired situational narcissism”). It didn’t help. Only the speedballs and cocaine and the blotters of acid stamped with Bart Simpson and Pikachu meant anything to me, were the only things that made me feel something. Cocaine was destroying the lining of my nose and I honestly thought a good solution was to switch solely to basing, but the two quarts of vodka I was drinking daily made even that goal seem hazy and unattainable. I also realized I had written only one thing in the last two years: a horrible short story involving space aliens, a fast food restaurant and a talking bisexual scarecrow, even though I had promised ICM the first draft of my memoir. Since, according to Binky, we were turning down authorized biography requests at least twice a month, more than a dozen publishers had made inquiries about the memoir. I had talked brazenly about it during the Glamorama tour, where it was most prominently detailed in the (incoherent) Rolling Stone interview I did in the 1998 year-end double issue. I had even given it a title without having written a single usable sentence: Where I Went I Would Not Go Back. It was to deal primarily with the transforming events of my childhood and adolescence, ending with my junior year at Camden, a month before Less Than Zero was published. But even when I simply thought about the memoir it wouldn’t go anywhere (I could never be as honest about myself in a piece of nonfiction as I could in any of my novels) and so I gave up. (There is, however, an unauthorized biography Bloomsbury is publishing next year by a writer named Jaime Clarke that I will vehemently protest the publication of—its title: Ellis Island.) And the drugs continued.

There was also the money problem—I didn’t have any. I had blown it all. On what? Drugs. Parties that cost $50,000. Drugs. Girls who wanted to be taken to Italy, Paris, London, St. Barts. Drugs. A Prada wardrobe. A new Porsche. Drugs. Rehab treatment that wasn’t covered by health insurance. The movie money from polishing jobs that had, at one point, showered down on me started drying up when the drug rumors became too detailed to ignore and after I sent back several screenplays with none of the requested changes made and just my random notes scrawled in the margins: “Not so good” and “I think this rather excellent” and “Let’s beef it up” and the ubiquitous “I hated my father.” The spark that had once animated
me had majorly fizzled out. What was I doing hanging out with gang-bangers and diamond smugglers? What was I doing buying kilos? My apartment reeked of marijuana and freebase. One afternoon I woke up and realized I didn’t know how anything worked anymore. Which button turned the espresso machine on? Who was paying my mortgage? Where did the stars come from? After a while you learn that everything stops.

It was time to minimize damage. It was time to renew contacts. It was time to expect more from myself.

I had lost the hustle, the nerve, the shit it took to keep myself standing in the spotlight. My desire to be part of the Scene shrank—I was exhausted by it all. My life—my name—had been rendered a repetitive, unfunny punch line and I was sick of eating it. Celebrity was a life lived in code—it was a place where you constantly had to decipher what people wanted from you, and where the terrain was slippery and a world where ultimately you always made the wrong choice. What made everything less and less bearable was that I had to keep quiet about this because I knew no one else who could sympathize (maybe Jay McInerney, but he was still so lost inside it all that he never would have understood) and once I grasped that I was totally alone, I realized, only then, that I was in serious trouble. My wistful attitude about fame and drugs—the delight I took in feeling sorry for myself—had turned into a hard sadness, and the future no longer looked even remotely plausible. Just one thing seemed to be racing toward me: a blackness, a grave, the end. And so during that terrible year there were the inevitable 12-step programs, the six different treatment centers, the endless second chances, the fourth intervention, the unavoidable backsliding, the multiple relapses, the failed recoveries, the sudden escape to Las Vegas, the tumble into the abyss and, finally, the flameout.

I ultimately called Jayne. She listened. She made an offer. She held out a hand. I was so shocked that I broke into tears. What I was being given—I understood immediately—was extremely rare: a second chance with someone. I was briefly reluctant at first, but there was one factor overriding everything: no one else wanted me.

And because of this I instantly rebounded. I got clean in May, signed a huge contract for a new novel with a reluctant Knopf and an insistent ICM in June and then moved into Jayne’s newly built mansion in July. We married later that month in a private ceremony at City Hall with
only Marta, her assistant, as a witness. But Jayne Dennis was a well-known actress and “somehow” the news leaked. Immediately the National Enquirer ran an article on Jayne’s “spectacularly bad luck in love” and listed all of her ill-fated relationships (when had she dated Matthew McConaughey? Billy Bob Thornton? Russell Crowe? Who in the hell was Q-Tip?) before asking its readers, “Why is Jayne Dennis with a man who let her down so cruelly?” Comparisons were made to Anjelica Huston and Jack Nicholson, to Jerry Hall and Mick Jagger. A clinical psychologist hypothesized that famous women were no different from nonfamous women when it came to bad choices in relationships. “You can be beautiful and successful and still be attracted to a loser,” the clinical psychologist was quoted as saying, adding that “beautiful women are often geek magnets.” The article went on about my “crude insensitivity” and “refusal to disavow the comments made about Keanu Reeves’s role” in all of this. One anonymous source offered, “The novelty of dating a skunk must be arousing—she must really crave a challenge.” A “close friend” of Jayne’s was quoted as saying, “Marrying Bret Easton Ellis was one of the leading dumb choices of the new century.”

Damage control. We sat for a Talk magazine profile (titled “Cad or Catch?”) in which Jayne defended me and I repented. The article detailed the years I’d spent mired in drugs and alcohol, though I said I was now reformed. “Vicious false things have been said about Bret,” Jayne offered. When prodded by Jayne I “indignantly” added, “Yeah, I’m bitter about them as well.” Jayne went on to lament: “This business can be so hard on relationships that I’ve lost a lot of self-confidence” and “I think nice guys—whatever that means—were so intimidated by me that the men I dated weren’t usually very caring.” The writer noted the “sidelong glance” Jayne gave me. The writer noted my “grim countenance” and did not seem to believe me when I said, “I always try to be in the moment when I’m with my kids—I’m really devoting my life to fatherhood.” (The journalist failed to notice how darkly amused I was by everything at this point in my newly sober life: a crestfallen expression, the smear of blood on a hand, the heart that had stopped beating, the cruelty of children.) This writer had his own pop-psychology take on matters: “Famous women are known for sabotaging themselves because they don’t feel they deserve what they have” and “It takes character to resist a cad, and celebrities definitely do not have stronger than average character.” The writer also asked me questions along the lines of “Some reviewers have doubts about your sincerity—how do you respond?” and “Why did you pass out at the Golden Globe Awards last
year?" But Jayne kept coming through with sound bites like “Bret is my source of strength,” to which an unnamed friend responded, “That’s a joke. Let’s face it, the reason Jayne married Bret Ellis is all about low self-esteem. She deserves better than a professional frat boy, okay? Ellis is a complete hoser.” Another unnamed friend was quoted as saying, “Bret wouldn’t even escort her to prenatal care appointments! We’re talking about a guy who smoked Thai sticks in taxicabs.” Jayne admitted that being attracted to “bad boys” had been an addiction and that their “unpredictability” gave her a rush. “Hey, I’m an interesting date,” I’m somehow quoted as saying. Another anonymous source: “I think she’s with Bret because Jayne’s a fixer-upper—she has convinced herself that a good guy’s in there.” Another nameless source disagreed and put it more succinctly: “He’s. A. Dick.” My own conclusion was “Jayne makes my life complete—I’m a grateful guy.” The article ended—shockingly, I thought—with: “Good luck, Jayne.”

By this time, Jayne had moved out of Los Angeles and into the anonymous suburbia of the Northeast, close enough to New York for meetings and business but at the same time safely distant from what she saw as the increasing horror of urban life. The attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon was the initial motivation, and Jayne briefly considered some exotically remote place deep in the Southwest or the vastness of the heartland, but her goal eventually simplified itself into moving at least two hours away from any large city, since that’s where suicide bombers were blowing themselves up in crowded Burger Kings and Starbuckses and Wal-Marts and in subways at rush hour. Miles of major cities had been cordoned off behind barbed wire, and morning newspapers ran aerial photographs of bombèd-out buildings on the front page, showing piles of tangled bodies in the shadow of the crane lifting slabs of scorched concrete. More and more often there were “no survivors.” Bulletproof vests were on sale everywhere, because scores of snipers had suddenly appeared; the military police stationed on every corner offered no solace, and surveillance cameras proved useless. There were so many faceless enemies—from within the country and abroad—that no one was certain who we were fighting or why. Cities had become mournful places, where everyday life was suddenly interrupted by jagged mounds of steel and glass and stone, and grief on an unimaginable scale was rising up over them, reinforced by the stained, tattered photocopies of the missing posted everywhere, which were
not only a constant reminder of what had been lost but also a warning of what was coming next, and in the endless CNN montages of people wandering around in a slow-motion daze, some wrapped in American flags, while the soundtrack was Bruce Springsteen softly singing “We Shall Overcome.” There were too many fearful moments when the living envied the dead, and people started moving away to the country, the suburbs, anywhere. Cities were no place to raise a family, or, more pointedly according to Jayne, start one. So many people had lost their capacity for love.

Jayne wanted to raise gifted, disciplined children, driven to succeed, but she was fearful of just about everything: the threat of pedophiles, bacteria, SUVs (we owned one), guns, pornography and rap music, refined sugar, ultraviolet rays, terrorists, ourselves. I took anger management sessions and went over “past wounds” with a therapist after a brief and heated exchange concerning Robby popped up in an otherwise innocuous conversation between the two of us. (It was all about what he wanted. It was all about what he needed. Everything I desired was overridden, and I had to accept this. I had to rise up to it.) I spent that summer trying to get to know this worried, sad, alert boy who gave evasive answers to questions I felt demanded clarity and precision, and also Sarah, who was now six and basically just kept informing me of how bored she was by everything. Since camp had been canceled, Jayne and I organized activities to push them out of their stupor: the karate class, the oboe lesson, the phonics tapes, the smart toys, the trip to the wax museum, the aquarium we visited. The summer was saying no to Robby (who considered himself a “professional” video game player) because he wanted to fly to Seoul for the World Cyber Games. The summer was getting acquainted with the wide array of meds the kids were on (stimulants, mood stabilizers, the antidepressant Lexapro, the Adderall for attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and various other anticonvulsants and antipsychotics that had been prescribed). The summer was building a fort. It was decorating cookies. It was a silver robot I purchased for Robby, to which he responded, “I’m too old, Bret.” It was the astronomy CD-ROM he wanted instead. It was the summer of the trampoline I bought and the minor injury Robby sustained while attempting a stunt. We went for walks through a forest. We took nature hikes. I couldn’t believe I actually toured both a farm and a chocolate factory, and also petted a giraffe (who later was killed by lightning after a freak summer storm) at the local zoo. I became reacquainted with Snuffleupagus. The summer was colors and shapes and counting with Sarah, who could say...
“Hola,” and there was always the blue dog and the friendly dragon and the puppet shows where the animals interacted suggestively with one another, and I would read The Poky Little Puppy to her on CD-ROM, which made the book seem cold and barren, the illustrations staring out at us from the empty glow of the computer screen. It all seemed vaguely unreal to me. I was thrust into the role of husband and father—of protector—and my doubts were mountainous. But I was moving with a higher purpose. I was involuntarily striving toward something. I took a more commanding tone with the children when they were acting surly or indifferent or spoiled, which seemed to relieve Jayne. (But Jayne also requested that I stay “focused,” and so I easily secured a position as a creative writing teacher at the local college—even if the group of students met only once a week for three hours.) I found myself changing and had no choice but to feel that this conversion validated me. I no longer craved action. The tightness of city life vanished—the suburbs were fragmented and rambling; there was no more flipping through the devil’s dictionary (Zagat’s) to find a decent restaurant, and the bidding war for reservations disappeared. Who cared about the VIP booth anymore, or mugging for paparazzi on the red carpet at movie premieres? I was relaxed in the suburbs. Everything was different: the rhythm of the days, your social status, suspicions about people. It was a refuge for the less competitive; it was the minor leagues. You simply didn’t have to pay as much attention to things. The precise pose was no longer required. I had expected to be bored, and to be angered by that boredom, but it never materialized. Passing by someone pruning a shrub did not spark the powder keg of regret I expected. I had canceled my subscription to I Want That! and for a while I was okay. One day late in August I drove by a simple field dotted with poplars and I suddenly held my breath. I felt a tear on my face. I was happy, I realized with amazement. But by the end of that summer everything I had learned started to disappear.

The “problems” that developed within the house over the next two months actually began late in October and hit crisis point in November. Everything collapsed in a time frame made up of twelve days.

I’ve recounted the “incidents” in sequential order. Lunar Park follows these events in a fairly straightforward manner, and though this is, ostensibly, a true story, no research was involved in the writing of this book. For example, I did not consult the autopsy reports concerning the murders
that occurred during this period—because, in my own way, I had committed them. I was responsible, and I knew what had happened to the victims without referring to a coroner. There are also people who dispute the horror of the events that took place that autumn on Elsinore Lane, and when the book was vetted by the legal team at Knopf, my ex-wife was among those who protested, as did, oddly enough, my mother, who was not present during those frightful weeks. The files that the FBI kept on me—beginning in November of 1990, during the prepublication controversy surrounding *American Psycho*, and maintained ever since—would have clarified things, but they have not been released and I’m barred from quoting them. And the few “witnesses” who could corroborate these events have disappeared. For example, Robert Miller, the paranormal investigator I hired, simply vanished, and the Web site where I first contacted him no longer exists. My psychiatrist at the time, Dr. Janet Kim, offered the suggestion that I was “not myself” during this period, and has hinted that “perhaps” drugs and alcohol were “key factors” in what was a “delusional state.” Names have been changed, and I’m semivague about the setting itself because it doesn’t matter; it’s a place like any other. Retelling this story has taught me that *Lunar Park* could have happened anywhere. These events were inevitable, and would have occurred no matter where I was at that particular moment in my life.

The title *Lunar Park* is not intended as a take on Luna Park (as it mistakenly appeared on the initial Knopf contracts). The title means something only to my son. These are the last two words of this book, and by then, I hope they will be self-explanatory to the reader as well.

Regardless of how horrible the events described here might seem, there’s one thing you must remember as you hold this book in your hands: all of it really happened, every word is true.

The thing that haunted me the most? Since no one knew what was happening in that house, no one was scared for us.

And now it’s time to go back into the past.