

BEOWULF

Michael Paul Simons

Listen, I tell the girls, I am the whole damn assassination. I'm Oswald perched like a patsy, sixth floor, Texas School Book Depository. I'm Jack Kennedy in the car startled by my own magic bullet reenactment. I'm the CIA, the Russians, the Cubans. I'm every bit of brain on Jackie's pink coat. I'm Jackie reaching out to comfort myself. The Mob, the Secret Service, the grassy knoll. I'm Jack Ruby waiting out that bright, beautiful Dallas day. I am Cecile B. Zapruder filming the whole fucking thing.

So after five days gallivanting not even a caffeine rush can spare you two girls from your crashing. Britney, what goes up must also fall back. Drug use isn't rocket science, sweetheart—hell, it's not even riding a rocket. A monkey can do it. They've proved a monkey can do it. They've proved a monkey can take a capsule into space, come back and pose for *Life* magazine. What a monkey can't do—what you can't do, Montana—is comprehend that payload you're sitting on: rocket boosters blasting, one after the other. You are merely feather-weight accessories attending my brave journey.

Let's not forget, girls, this is about glory—the boys of bygone days had glory, and by-God, I won't die without my fair share.

This Taco Bell isn't safe. There's a freak out there in the shadows, lying in wait. But what do you girls care as long as the soft-drink refills are free?

Well, I'm here, and I will stop him. I brought a ball-peen hammer just in case—but I'm not going to need it. I'll tear him apart bare-handed.

Did you know I know the night manager here?

Hello, Maggie. Are you operating your Taco Bell effectively? Why are there so many strong-arm robberies around? There's

a patrol car parked outside the Exxon across the street—but do you think the cowboy inside is going to protect you? Your tacos aren't safe. Are you listening to me, Maggie?

She's back there. Or maybe she's not. I'll defend the Taco Bell if she won't. I must say I'm disappointed. They don't teach courage these days.

Maggie was my ex-girlfriend—I don't know where we stand now. I remember sketching out a perpetual motion machine in her sociology notebook. Just so. Perfect. Not just theory. I wonder if she still has it.

Britney, fill out an application. Montana has money, but you're going to need a job soon. Free bean burritos. Free drink refills. Advancement opportunities.

So you're sleepy. So you have a headache. You know that woodpecker outside my bedroom window? He keeps at it—six in the morning. You'll hear no complaint from me. He's got a perfectly reasonable reason to be out there knocking his head into the tree. It's a job. It's his place. I have curtains and magnanimity.

Pay attention to these life lessons, sweetheart. Why do you waste your life away? Apply yourself. Get a job. You have little else to do and nowhere else to go. Factories are shutting down, packing their bags, and moving like missionaries to countries you've never heard of. Mexico. China. India. I have job skills, but what do you have? Seventeen-year-old good looks? Britney, love yourself just as you are. You don't need designer lipstick to look beautiful to me. Your being young and impressionable is enough. Look, at least consider getting a job.

Wake up. Turn your head toward the door. SLOWLY. Don't make them think you're watching, Montana. See the ruler markings on the door? If you decide to steal something, babygirl, they're going to know how tall you are. Their cameras are filming us. Should something freaky happen, there'll be an official recording.

Well ladies, in the beginning I boasted that if I wasn't President of the United States by age 35, I would jump off the Hurston Bridge. So you see I'm ambitious.

At 34, I decided, out of the blue, fuck it. Fried eggs and Nancy Reagan notwithstanding. I had lost heart. Your dumping me all those years ago, Maggie, didn't help. There is no real future in television repair or satellite installation. Mind you I knew full well going in the dangers, which is more than I can say for these two dummies. They'll deny they've fallen into the well, and they'll deny the water's chest deep and rising. Make a wish.

These girls like to party and care nothing about my noble experiment. As long as I drive them where they need to be, they are usually good about finding money, or at least Montana is. These girls keep me company, but they don't even know my real name. I told the girls to call me Beowulf. That's before I remembered that Grendel was the monster, and by that time we'd already partied several times, so of course it was too late to change monikers. I regret nothing.

So you'll want to know about my transformation. It was beautiful—it was like how everybody knows where they were standing when Kennedy was shot. I demanded my undoing to be symbolic. I said a little prayer. "Ashes to Ashes." We listened to David Bowie and waited for this guy. I smoked a cigarette. We watched *Apollo 13*. I smoked another cigarette. We burned candles and read tarot cards. I forget how long we waited or whose house we were at.

My first snort—an iron-fisted suckerpunch—and then a flash, apparently official, tore through my bloodstream. At 1:00 pm Central Standard Time I was no longer who I was.

There is nothing I want more than to be another thing. In vino veritas. In taco tacitoss.

At first the girls called me professor because I knew so much. Anybody who can answer a single *Jeopardy!* question would impress them. I am twice their age and infinitely smarter. The

brighter one—Britney believe it or not—had a lightbulb moment when she realized that by adding their ages together you got mine. I breathe life into these two girls. They read Bukowski because of me. Billy Burroughs. Denis Johnson.

Britney, Montana, you two and that baby boy you have been fucking don't know half of the hell you're up against. You think you have will power. You tested your will power to prove you had it. Well of course you think you do and that's the beauty of the whole thing. As long as there's some guy in a house somewhere cooking down Mexican cough syrup there's always going to be some pretty illusion that you have it under control. It's a postmodern spin on the teenage trip—you two are gorgeous—that you can pretend to be teenagers when in fact you are nothing of the kind. What I love most about you is how many bean burritos you buy but don't eat. How many sodas you drink, my pretties, and never ever seem to gain weight.

You are fearless and you should have fear. If you are dreaming right now, I sincerely hope your dreams are nightmares. Dear Britney, dear Montana, sooner or later something will happen. The life of each body will be crushed.

If I wasn't loitering at this Taco Bell I would loiter at another. There are so many.

Nothing, nothing, nothing out there prevents the slow approach of that maniac.

I realize you are not listening, Maggie, but really perhaps you should.

To be perfectly honest, I've considered robbing this Taco Bell myself. No offense intended. Before we came, we had plans to rob the place. I drafted them myself. Imagine our rushing in as a mob, storming the counter.

Yes, we could rob you. But then you'd know as we left how tall we are. You could be more responsible, Maggie. I don't think you are a good nightshift manager. I don't think the Taco Bell executives would approve. They ought to see how tall you stand

as you walk out the door later tonight. If you walk out tonight...

I have the weaponry and the brute strength to overtake anybody. Also, I have the brain of thirty geniuses. And it's that guy out there you should be wary of—the one you hear about on the police scanner. He's rising up out of the thick fen of night.

The danger is real, yet I'm the only one with eyes open enough to see.

Five days wide awake and now in the plastic booth of the Taco Bell my blondies sleep like sweet potatoes. And where are you? The little girls sleep. They show no concern for desperados or your personal safety. They are peaceful, law-abiding. But where are you?

A fog born of showers conceals so you can't see the Exxon station across the road. Something walks through the fog. Approaching slowly.

I am not afraid of this wretched creature.

Montana, tell Maggie how the earth is 6,000 years old. That's what good Christian girls believe, right? Giants once walked the earth. And dinosaurs coexisted with man. What did your father teach you? That God was fucking with us when it came to the dinosaurs, sneaking bones under rocks? The whole story of humankind is one of depravity. We were once nothing. Do you know that? We came into being like a big bang in your mother's crotch. Then we evolved—you can trace our degraded form right back to Cain. We are still marked. Yet, as a species we can create complex social orders like the Taco Bell. Life must be a miracle!

He's here! I see him—mostly I see my reflection in the window, but he is behind it—he's walking up the parking lot. Approaching slowly. I am ready. If he steps one foot through that door I will tear him from limb to limb.

Wake up. You two should record this for future generations. My only hope for survival is to speak directly to the surveillance camera, hope my message will ride microwaves into the distant reaches, touch every surface of the universe like a gentle breath.

All is vanity. All is breath. Fame and immortality. Distant and future generations will replay my saga. Like the reruns of *I Love Lucy*. I will be known and live forever.

Wait for applause.

I choose to use. I choose to use and do the other things—not because they are easy, but because they are hard. Because I am the exception that proves the rule. Because my only living peer is John Glenn. We have balls, blasting into orbit strapped inside a suicide capsule—knowing the pipedream chance of making it back to earth. I do not waste my time. I am not afraid of doom.

This morning—no, not this morning, but recently—I woke up in a bed. Fresh linens. And that crack of light wedged between the curtains. The woodpecker. I'd like to invite that woodpecker inside. He seems to be a good finder of things. I never liked living here. I never liked living here. I never liked living here.

My earliest memory not lost to oblivion: stretching my hand up into the black glove of space. Reaching and reaching. Jumping up. Laughing. Climbing anything I could find. Laughing. Laughing and crying. Crying and screaming. Shouting. Shouting and gasping. Casting a net of blame. Furious. Feverish. A porch light bleaching out my one best shot. Belting out inconsolable anguish.

No—there's no way this metaphor will hold. I'm stuck in this capsule shooting ten thousand miles per hour back to earth and there's no way this metaphor will hold. The rivets are groaning. There are no reverse rockets. I'm man versus machine versus science itself. I told Maggie that. Why aren't you listening? There are no more heroes. I am the last. I am John Glenn. My reentry will burn brighter than any ball of fire—it will be the blinding confusion that is God. You will know my name. You will know my name. Already I smell the bright red phosphorous breath of my undoing.

Pause.

Then silence.

I see God.

**Thrown on my back and facing the star-ridden void of space,
God appears immaculate and glorious and He sings “Stardust.”
He sings for Kennedy, He sings for Me.**

**Again silence. The hwaet, hwaet, hwaet of my heart beating. A
suggestion: “I’m still here.”**

Godspeed, John Glenn, and good luck.