

Eating Glass

Then Jenny's mom said "You know, he was never that nice to me and didn't say hello like he did to the other people, but he did swim every day so as a testament to his memory maybe we should keep swimming."



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White Devils

Ton is about as Dutch and white as you can get which is just stating fact and has nothing to do with or gets in the way of him also being one of the coolest people ever. In 1988 he was in London to meet up with the Last Poets the fiery Islamic black prototype rappers and help them set up a tour in Europe. Keeping it correct, on a revolutionary level, the kina niggers you don't ever wanna meet, as Amiri Baraka said. The main guy Jalal was really nice and friendly and after they had arranged everything and there was TV appearance in the works it was all set Jalal invited Ton to hang out with the other guys and celebrate. So Ton's thinking singing, dancing, shouting, smoking and drinking a good time and then walks in and is the only white person in a room with about 50 righteous angry black men. Everybody was asked to get up and say something, to testify or whatever, and one after another it was all hardcore Muslim the white man is the devil and oppressor infidel messages, over and over, the white man must be stopped niggers are scared of the revolution! Etc. And Ton, well, when nobody was looking, he somehow snuck out of there, because, I mean, what was he going to say? Or as he put it, "I had no idea what I could tell these guys." On a related note, the Last Poets tour Ton put together was a big success.

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Working at the Mexican take-out place on a sleepy summer afternoon Hugh and I were staring out the window waiting for something to happen. \$6.50 an hour and all the quesadillas, burritos, tacos, enchiladas, jalapeno peppers, chips, Coke or Sprite you could eat and drink. The lunch rush was over and a calm had descended. The cooks were cleaning up or getting supplies and we were watching people walk by on the sidewalk through the big greasy picture window. Not talking much, just standing there with our elbows on the counter, resting. Then my friend Renee walked by and came in to say hello. The atmosphere abruptly changed and things weren't so boring anymore. Her beauty permeated the space, just filled it with electricity. Not run of the mill beauty but something otherworldly, a radiance of twenty-five year old unbridled feminine pulchritude just bursting out and conquering everything in its path. Including us, and even though I was her friend and used to it that day she looked even more sublime than usual, sublime in the sense that goes beyond beauty into a realm of the almost terrifying. And it wasn't just her looks; her personality had an infectious quality that just added to that all devouring young womanhood. Plus, she was dressed to go to an interview for some kind of phone sex operation, that is, she wasn't looking like a librarian or anything of the sort. She ended up not taking the job but that's another story. You can try to

picture it but you wouldn't even come close: Greenwich Avenue, 1991, Renee vanquishing everything and everyone in sight. I don't remember anything about the exchange but it was good humored and Hugh was laughing and talking too and then she said "Bye" off to the sex job interview and bounced right on out of there and down the street. It was like all the air had been sucked out of the room and there was a long crackling pause and Hugh turned to me and with his jaw clenched said the immortal line that will never be forgotten. Gritting his teeth, practically grinding them, he managed to sputter "*I could eat glass!*" And you know, he pretty much got to the heart of the matter right then and there without too much fuss or verbiage. Kind of nailed it.

On the Way to Hollandale

Met the two German girls on a steamy hot summer night in 1992 on Bleeker Street and I have Welsh Eddie to thank for that. Despite all his faults he turned out to be good for something because the Germans, Jenny and Edna, were great. Eddie from Wales, my sister's old boyfriend who resembled one of the actors that played Dr. Who with his scarves and big curly hair and also infamously broke my mother's cross country skis once showed up in New York from Berlin where he'd been doing some kind of "guerrilla" theatre for a couple years. Called and said I'm here with these two women from Berlin you should come down. So I went to this huge apartment on Bleeker right by Broadway, some friend of one of the German's mothers who worked at the Goethe Institute. Those foreigners are always getting the good apartments. Jenny was darker and half Mexican and the other one Edna had curly blond locks the embodiment of a Teutonic ideal. Upon my arrival they disappeared to some upstairs room to have a real girl heart-to-heart, I found out later, and in the meantime Eddie and I caught up downstairs. After an hour or so the two girls came down and we drank some beer and I tried to explain the words "illin", "dope" and "fat", (or as it later got spelled and I never approved of, "Phat"). They got out a map of the United States and started planning their drive

across the country in the car they'd bought for \$250 up in Harlem so I said I'm going to Memphis and New Orleans next week we should meet up. Very quickly Jenny said ok let's do it and we looked up a restaurant in Memphis to pick out a rendezvous point. The next day I called her to make sure and she sounded incredulous, of course we were going to meet in Memphis, very stern.

July hot as hell in Memphis and I expected some kind of *Night in Memphis* scene that unsurprisingly didn't materialize. Mostly drank and wondered around on foot, down by the Mississippi and through some really run-down black neighborhoods where I must have been a white ghost because people stared at me like I was an apparition in their midst. The only thing of any consequence I did was look up the incomparable Panther Burns frontman Tav Falco's number in the phone book of my hotel room and though I never thought I'd do anything of the sort I called but the number was disconnected. He might have moved to Vienna, or Berlin, by then. Went to Sun Studios, bought a defective T-shirt for a lower price, did not go to Al Green's church or Graceland, and went to a museum that had good air conditioning and a collection I remember absolutely nothing about. Then I got my stuff and went to the restaurant which turned out to be closed to sit on the steps and wait for the Germans who I was pretty were not going to show up. But twenty minutes past the appointed time they drove up in a battered yellow and brown 1973 Toyota

Corolla with "Tiger" painted in cursive on the driver's side door and the three of us went to eat jambalaya and they told me how they'd gone to Graceland and that Elvis' nickname was tiger and they'd meet a teenager on a pilgrimage who said Elvis lived in Pennsylvania. For these two high culture Europeans conversant with Heine and Goethe this was a big treat, and more of the same lay ahead across America as they intended to drive to San Francisco. Went back to the hotel, ripped the page with Tav's number out of the phone book and headed south with nothing working on the Tiger's dashboard except one red light they called "The Red Light District", another light in the glove box and a radio they'd hooked up somehow. Went to a gas station where the really friendly Syrian man said I was a lucky guy to be traveling with these two beautiful girls and Edna told him "We heard about this gas station so we had to come to Memphis and see it." Not sure he got the humor there. Into Arkansas by mistake, back across the big muddy into Mississippi and turned right. At another gas station got viciously attacked by mosquitoes upon exiting the car as a black guy hanging out said "You' all aren't used to mosquitoes" in a barely decipherable drawl. Said hey do you want some beer, they stopped selling in there, but you' all can all come over to my crib and drink some beer, no mosquitoes, rest up for a while. Uh-huh. He said this about four times and Edna had this look on her face like no way and as we got into the car he leaned on the window, offering again, practically running along besides us as we drove off.

In Greenville we pulled into an old style American highway motor lodge and got a room from the sleepy Indian attendant for \$25. On TV the hair vacuum infomercial played as we watched with rapt attention and they got into their pajamas, and then somehow Gerhard Richter came up and Jenny told us about when she was young her mom's boyfriend was friends with Richter and they went to his house one Easter. The adults got drunk on wine and Jenny was bored and wanted to watch TV, so Richter begrudgingly got out a little black and white TV for her to watch in the kitchen away from the drunk adults but the only thing on was opera and it was snowing outside. Fuckin' Gerhard. Back in Mississippi cartoons raced across the screen as we turned on the air conditioner and fell asleep. Blazing hot the next day, the Greenville strip is not a pretty sight, got some orange juice, donuts and coffee and cigarettes. Asked the lady behind the counter if there were any lakes around? "Mr. Brown do you know any lakes these folks can swim in?" to an old man who told us to go to Lake Ferguson but stay in the designated swimming areas, and said he'd been in Germany during the war. Up a big embankment dyke-type thing at the lake on the other side a parking lot sloping down to the water with some jetties and boat, not the most appealing lake with trash all over and some people splashing around in a tiny abject buoyed-off area. Too unappetizing, squatted there and said we're not desperate enough for Lake Ferguson let's keep looking. Big fields, King Cotton, lots of sky down there, then to the State Park do you have a

lake? Yes. Can we swim in it? No. Why? Because the alligators. Oh. But there's a pool. Past the alligator-infested primeval swamp with the drooping tress to pay one dollar at the pool a delicious relief tons of black kids splashing and cavorting, went down the slide, got in, got out, smoked, got back in. Stocky corn-fed white boy lifeguard started talking to me he was about to get off work and drive to some other town to get fucked up, then he says the spades don't know how to swim and it wasn't too crowded today but boy when it gets packed full of them I just stay up in my chair and blow my whistle at the end of the day. Really, they act like animals. He told Jenny about this chicken place in Hollandale named Rick's or Ed's or something like that; let's check that out we're hungry.

On the way to Hollandale we pulled off and stood around in the cotton fields. Cotton, cotton, cotton everywhere as far as the eye could see and never knew it grew just like a fluffy cotton ball like that on the plant. We got to Rick's where there were plastic tables and strangely and appropriately enough the Rostock riots were on the TV. Amazing, greasy fried chicken and then as we were leaving the daughter of the establishment half-asked, half-commanded me to come into the kitchen to open a pickle jar which turned out to be one of those twenty gallon white buckets. She disappeared after putting a big butcher knife in my hand leaving me alone except for an elderly black woman who ignored me while stirring a pot with a big ladle. I started sawing away and after five minutes

was only half way through, sawing and sawing, imagining this huge exceedingly sharp knife slipping and blood going everywhere. Eventually, after what seemed like half an hour I pried off the top with a last desperate burst of effort and looked up at the old woman for approval but she just kept stirring and barely smiled. Out front I put the knife down on the counter and we left. No thank you or anything, sort of like it was expected, which is fine. Southward bound we sighted water to the west and went over to some empty trailer homes next to wooden piers on what we thought was the Mississippi. Extremely tranquil and quiet, nobody was around, and after we left came to the disappointing conclusion it was probably a lake and not the elusive longest river in North America. The sun went down behind the single lane road and we couldn't find the highway as visions of *Deliverance* reared through my head but I didn't share with Jenny and Edna. Finally got to the main road and down past Vicksburg, which provoked a lot of mirth because "Vick" is German slang for masturbation so Vicksburg is literally "The castle of masturbation."

Into Louisiana past the magnificent chemical and oil refineries lit up for miles into Baton Rouge. Got a motel room, black girl studying at the desk, not the safest part of town, turned on the TV and it was hard-core porn. We watched, giggled, and awkwardly talked about how it really wasn't that exciting or "sensual." The next morning hamburgers for breakfast, Edna couldn't deal, too American, and a middle-aged man

said "You're not from around here" and told us to have a nice stay. Watched the session at Huey Long's State Capital, went to the top for the view, and then took off for New Orleans where we made our way to the French Quarter and holed up in a sleepy dimly-lit bar and waited for Justin. And then what happened? Three days in New Orleans. It was good, it was great, but it's lost to the fog of memory and the last thing I remember is Justin, Raphael and I high as kites on heroin lying in the park across from their apartment barely able to stand up and say goodbye to Jenny and Edna as they got into the Tiger and drove away.

Into the Maelstrom

Driving down Rockaway Blvd. away from the projects towards Breezy Point after a day changing signs at grimy delis in the projects sweating and having disgusting liquids drip on me from tattered air conditioners fingers filthy from goeey sign frames sweat soaked just thought I have to get in the water. Didn't care if I had time or not, it was imperative. Needed some cleansing. Past Jacob Riis park, past the Gil Hodges Memorial Bridge on the right and the food truck on the left and then the straightway for two miles before turning left into the street to the parking lot at Fort Tilden where you're supposed to have fisherman's permit. It was about four in the afternoon in June, beautiful hot day and already so much better and more refreshing than if you're on the sidewalk in the cuts, the smell of sea air coming through the window as I rounded the curve and parked. There wasn't a single car there, which was a little strange, and when I got to the beach there was not a single person to be seen as far as the eye could see on this beatific summer day. And man, the waves were pumping, like I'd never seen break there before. Probably because of a big storm down in the Carolinas I'd heard about, furious misshapen sets coming in, waves ricocheting off each other, the water surging up to the end of the beach way farther than I'd ever seen it go. Pretty impressive, and a little scary. Not some North Shore massive unbelievable shit, but still, like the Wedge or

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Sandys on Oahu, six to eight foot high waves breaking right there in three feet of water. And the more I stood there alone the more I thought maybe this isn't such a good idea. Because the riptide can be powerful there and on top of that these waves were relentless and angry, crashing left and right, and I started imaging the possibilities of maybe going in and never coming back out. Like those stories in the newspaper. Park rangers found his car in the parking lot and the body washed up two weeks later. My ardor cooled a little, and I was feeling a little cleaner and lighter and thinking well maybe I shouldn't risk it, looks kind of gnarly, I'll guess I'll do the prudent thing this time.

Back in the parking lot I got my keys from on top of the back tire and was about to leave when this big flashy Cadillac drives up, not some SUV bullshit but one of the big sedans, and this large Italian guy in his 50s gets out looking straight out of *The Sopranos*. Big pot belly, wearing trunks, some sandals, a Mafioso going to beach vibe, and with him from out of the passenger seat comes this nine or ten year-old Indian or Pakistani kid, not sure which. A very odd couple. There was a sort of grandfather and grandson vibe, or uncle and nephew, definitely something familial, maybe the kid was adopted who knows but there they were in their swim trunks getting ready to go down to the beach. I checked them out and as they walked I had to ask, "You going in?" "Yup" was Vinny the Mooch's unequivocal response. "Uhm, the waves are pretty big, it seems kind of dangerous." I

couldn't believe I was being the voice of reason to this overweight fifty-plus goomba and his ten-year-old cohort. "Ahh, it'll be great, it's a lovely day," he said like I was a ninny and off they went toward the loud wave sounds coming from the beach. Then I stood there with my key in hand, hearing the siren call of those big waves, pondered for a moment and thought, wait, if these two are going in then I better too. Part of it was a genuine worry about their well-being, but mostly it was that I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I was one-upped by this duo. So back I went, the sound booming as I approached and white water and spray visible from even far back on the path. And when I got to there he was already up to his waist, looking like a happy sea lion joyously bouncing around in the surf. He made the kid stay out on the sand, which was probably a good idea. I stood there for a second with the kid watching his step-granddad or whoever he was getting sucked out further into the maelstrom and then I smiled down at the kid who was looking longingly at the breakers and said ok here I go and ran into the washing machine. The first one reared up over my head and I dove through to the other side. Up, up, up on the next one, over the falls, crash, tumble, upside down sideways up to get some air, and again, and again. As I rose and fell, dove under, and got twirled around like a piece of flotsam my new friend the happy Italian sea lion was right there with me having the time of his life, "Isn't this great!" I heard him yell right before getting mashed by another one, and when I came up again, sputtered

"Yeah!" A few minutes of that and I was worked, "OK I'm getting out," I bellowed as he smiled back maniacally through the mist. Deposited in a heap back on shore, huffing and puffing, I said goodbye to the kid and left him there watching that great happy fat man toss and tumble out in the waves.