

PARTY AT THE WORLD'S END



Sample from a novel by James Curcio,

Book One of the Fallen Cycle

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Based on **FALLEN NATION: BABYLON BURNING**,
a screenplay by Jamie Curcio and Jason Stackhouse

PARTY AT THE WORLD'S END

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Chapter 1. Rome Wasn't Burnt In A Day

*Fallen! Babylon the Great has fallen!
She has become a home for demons.
She is a prison for every evil spirit,
every unclean bird,
and every unclean and hated beast.*

—Revelations 18:2



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Lola Rose Parsons. Even back then, she went by Lilith.

I still try to envision her face. It's like trying to draw blindfolded.

Of course, I could just look at a poster—she went and got famous, or infamous, while I stayed in this same, slowly-bloating suburban town—but I wanted to remember not what she had become, but instead how she had been. I wanted every detail, like the force of my will could peel back time if I gave it a little attention every day. I would get the arch of her eyebrow—just an eyebrow could telegraph such mischief and vulnerability—but which was the act? And then I'd move on to her eyes and get lost, or I would second-guess the eyebrow.

It never came out quite right, so I had to start all over again.

I guess memory is no great artist. Or maybe it is a far greater artist than I know. How could I be sure that I hadn't invented her, or constructed that month we spent together like I did her face, trying to turn these jigsaw pieces into a coherent image? And where was she in all this? Absent.

She must have known she was trapped on the other side of the sob stories of so many ex-lovers, the one who changed everything and got away, giving that enigmatic Mona Lisa smile, except when the façade broke at that practiced moment.

The self-aware Manic Pixie Girl, sixteen and already typecast. She used us all, and did it selflessly. I can't imagine how lonely she must have been. I know now that there was a method behind it all—well, you'll see, if I do my part and get that eyebrow and eye right and can move on to the lips.

I was a sophomore. A virgin, which meant less to me than it seemed to for others. I had never taken a drug stronger than amoxicillin, never committed a crime, and most definitely had never been in love. It was August. The month before planes started flying into buildings.

By late September, I had been party to a carjacking. Subcutaneous ketamine injection. That's a long story. I'd seen a shooting, felt true rage—just punching and punching until you may as well be pounding sirloin. By October, and for the first time, I'd had my heart broken.

The first time you fuck can mean a lot, or it can mean very little. The first time you have your heart broken, or at least, think it is—I think that changes a person. Always.

It was all a lot for a month—or was it two? And this is the only excuse I can give for the fact that I'm still obsessed with a girl whom I haven't seen in over a decade.

I'm honestly a little embarrassed to say how it began. I was living in an apartment complex with my parents, and in the middle of the complex was a playground, a tennis court, and a pool—which, by this time of year, was full of baby urine. Every day I walked by the swings on the way to and from the bus, and on that day, for whatever reason, I happened to climb atop the slide. I sat there, my head in one hand, and found myself thinking. I don't remember what about now, only that it was a dark thought, a lonely one, a very typical thing for a teenager to think.

“You live here?” a voice asked, and I turned toward it. I had to shield the sun from my eyes and saw the outline of a girl. No face, just trails of red hair whipping around in the wind, like spun

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copper. A nose ring glittered in the late-day sun, a plaid skirt and punk T, backpack festooned with pins and patches. Hunting gear.

She was on the swing at the playground, kicking up her legs. “Yeah,” I said. I slid down and hopped up, getting a better look at her in the process. Anyone who has surfed the internet lately, knows what she looks like now. A chameleon, but the hair never changed. I later wondered if her makeup had been tattooed on. Even a downpour never disturbed it.

“My family just moved in.” She stopped, staring at something in my eyes for a split-second. I think it was my soul. (All nascent and shriveled up, a suburban white-boy hiding beyond the projected swagger of Ghostface Killa.)

“Apartment 156. I’m going swimming though. Do you want to go swimming?” she asked.

“The water’s full of, uh, baby urine,” I said.

“Then don’t drink it,” she said.

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I hadn’t brought swim trunks with me, so I just jumped into the water in the shorts I was wearing. She sidled up beside me and slid past. Now she was behind me, her breasts pressed into my back, her hand grazing my stomach.

It dawns on me now, how weak most hetero men are to the wiles of women. If you’re just hitting puberty? Forget about it. You are a moody cock with legs. Find a girl who knows how to wield her sexual energy like a weapon, hones it like one, and you’re done for. Most men counter this insecurity by trying to make women think they’re powerless. ‘You’re stupid. You’re ugly. You’re weak’.

I had no idea about any of that, back then. I thought, ‘What was special about me?’ Nothing. But her attention spoke to that inner vanity, the same emotion that somehow wrapped itself like a cloak around something else—that we’re not special, that we don’t deserve anything, so we have to put on a front, a show, a con, so as to trick other people into believing we are deserving. That’s the word, right? Deserving of their affection, because at the end of the day, everyone wants love, no matter how twisted the desire becomes.

I’m stuck on this because the truth is, I can’t remember what I said in response, but I’m sure it was perfectly idiotic. I’ve blanked it out of my memory, it was that embarrassingly bad. I was anxious and aroused and confused and who the fuck was this girl anyway?

A gust of wind whipped across the water, sending an abrupt chill through me. The sky was changing suddenly. One of those freak thunderstorms which comes from nowhere. I made an ‘oh well’ kind of shrug and pulled myself out of the water, semi-consciously sucking in my gut as I did so, wondering what angle would present a better view for her. She watched me get out with an expression which I guess read as bemusement.

I started toward the gate, expecting I’d make for home and probably feel a little regretful later,

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and secretly a little relieved that I hadn't had to deal with the anxiety. The truth is, I wanted to run from this dangerous creature, with every cell in my body. Fuck. She's still got me in her tractor beam. She caught up to me with surprising ease, because I was walking really slowly. Because she makes you want to be caught.

"Thunder! I bet you were going to go home and play video games or something," she said.

"I had...considered it."

"Well, how about this. Take me for a drive in the thunderstorm."

"I'm fourteen," I said, like it was a final concession. "What are you, eighteen?"

"Meh. Numbers. Sixteen. Sixteen thousand," she said. "Come on."

I followed behind her to a Camaro. "You like this car?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Me too." She ripped off her shirt faster than I could say anything and wrapped her fist in it. CRASH. Put it right through the driver's side window. She got in.

My mouth wouldn't close. I looked from side to side. Strangely, no one seemed to have noticed.

"Get in."

By the time I'd rationalized this course of action, she already had the engine growling. The first splashes of rain were ping-ponging on the hood.

We tore off into the storm. She drove exactly the way you would imagine. Terror blotted out any joy I might otherwise have felt. My hands were cramped to uselessness by the time we were out of the complex. Pretty soon the storm hit in earnest, bending trees as it picked up.

"Getting really serious," I said, watching streams form beside us.

"And predictably enough, I don't care. Let's try this. You drive."

"What? NO!"

Let it be testament to what a fucking tool I am, that my indignation was swayed by a mere look. "It's not stealing, it's borrowing," she said. It wasn't much harder to coax me into topping out the engine on a straight away, 120 miles an hour down back roads, balancing the incredible sensation of her lips wrapped around my cock (my God how much practice did she have at this?), with the general importance of not dying. She'd slow down whenever I relaxed on the pedal or showed the slightest slip in concentration, watching me all the while, wide-eyed and gleeful, waiting for an eye roll, a sigh, and she would stop. Everything was a test, a challenge. How close can you get to the edge and not topple over? It was Jedi training with blow jobs.

Whether it was a matter of my distraction or the weather conditions, we started to fishtail. She pulled away, thankfully—I might have been castrated otherwise—and put on her seat belt.

"You mean you actually—" I started. I never got a chance to finish. We hit a wall of water and the car lifted clean into the air, tumbled, and slammed right side up again in four feet of water. Luck, or I don't know what, but we were completely unharmed. "FUCK!" I yelled. "Fuck. Fuck."

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She surveyed the situation for a second. We were mired in the valley between two tree-lined hills. “Damnit. OK. Roll down your window,” she said. “The doors will never open. Let’s go.”

When we got out, she climbed on the hood and stood, her arms outstretched. Lightning arced across the sky like electric effects at a Nikola Tesla event. She grabbed my hand and held it against her heart, pounding in her chest. Then she put it against mine. “Do you feel that?”

Of course I did.

She looked me in the eyes. I think this was the first time she had paid me real attention.

“You do this kind of thing often?” I asked.

“Sssssshh,” she said, suddenly serious. “Shut up. Feel it. Breathe with me.” The wind whistled through the grass, trees cracked, tires squealed in the distance. The music of Right Now. “This will never happen again,” she said, as if she could read my thoughts.

I tried. I was worried about how we could get in trouble. About where we were, and how we would possibly get home. I was cold and getting wet. I could get sick. I looked at her again. Improbably, we were standing on top of a Camaro in a rainstorm, submerged in water, begging to be hit by lightning. And I was spending it worrying about being cold and thinking about my mother.

“Alright, try this,” she said. She turned away from me, untying her bathing suit top slowly. She turned toward me and cupped my hands on her breasts. Her nipples were hard, pleasantly cold from the rain.

All of those anxieties went away. Even thoughts about sex went away. I just felt her breath striking my breath, the engine ticking beneath us, felt the lightning arc and the leaves struggle in the wind and water, everything around us breathing out and up a long hill, the fish-eyed lens of NOW, expanding like a bubble everywhichway in space and time.

The two of us huddled in the rain. She let the illusion permeate out of her, for that moment, that we were completely in love. It was a defining moment in my life. I wouldn’t ever admit it, but I’ve gone back there in my mind almost every day since.

As I watched the torrent of water rushing down the hill, I had an unusual thought, clear as a droplet of rain before it hits the mud. We live our lives always swimming against the current. When you’re as alive as I felt right then, you could swim upstream forever. What progress we’re making! But...

There’s always a ‘but’. Either all at once, or very gradually, the current fully overtakes us. We are swept out to sea.

That is beautiful or terrible, depending on how you feel about what was left behind, on how attached you are to you. But this is all we know—we came from that sea, and we return. It is inevitable. And I thought, it’d all be worth it, if I got to spend my life with a creature like this one.

She put on her top as she hopped off the car. The quiet moment where we pretended to have a life together was over, and there were other, more interesting adventures to be had. “Come on. The sky is falling.”

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Its rage renewed, the rainstorm bore down on the hill as we charged upward and directly into its force. This quickly became a slog against the flood. Half-submerged cars swelled past, like the prows of desolate boats. Their headlights shone eerily through murky water, and lit a group of men further up the hill. They were swaddled in jackets and scarves, which struck me as odd, because the chill of autumn hadn't really reached us yet. "Hey!" one bellowed, but they weren't looking at us. They headed toward the light, and punched the windshield of a car which wouldn't slow down for them.

"FUCKING ASSHOLE!" one screamed, another pointlessly punching out the tail light as it struggled past. The driver stopped, even rolling his window down in the downpour.

"Are you nuts?!" he yelled. "Who the fuck are you people?" Then he laid on his horn, slamming it again and again. I wondered if he was the crazy one. Someone had just punched his car, and he was trying to talk to them? And then yeah, the horn. That'll scare them off.

"Get the fuck out!" I yelled, trying to be helpful.

One of the men laughed. "Hey, this guy has the right idea," he said, inspecting the blood trickling between his fingers. "Why don't you get out?" He grabbed the driver, and with one motion unbuckled him and slammed his head into the steering wheel.

Another grabbed the door, yanked it open and dragged the stunned driver to the road. They piled in and drifted off into the early evening gloom.

The remaining tail light disappeared. There was a squeal, the sound of a loud splash and then a solid WHOMP as the car hit something in the darkness. Lilith laughed so hard she could barely keep on her feet, though it passed quickly.

"Second carjacking today," I said to her. This time, at least we weren't the perpetrators.

"Bet you money they slammed into the Camaro we left back there," Lilith said. The driver groaned loudly and flopped around in the water, like someone was flaying him alive.

She sighed and then put out her hand at him coquettishly. He was wearing a nice suit which was pretty much destroyed. "Stop. Breathe. You lost a car, gained your life." She kissed him on the cheek. This did seem to calm him down a little.

"Close your eyes and open your mouth," she suddenly said.

He looked at me, as if my judgment should for some reason matter. "I'd do what the girl says, sir," I said, mostly curious to see what the fuck she was up to.

He closed his eyes forcefully. Rain splashed his tongue. In this light he looked like Frankenstein, blue-skinned, lightning-lit, but a childish laugh bubbled out of him, an escaping, hidden memory. Maybe he was recalling being three and having his first ice cream? I really don't know. She produced a dropper and a vial which read 'Europharm AG'.

"To Laughter and Forgetting," she said cryptically. One drop on the tongue.

There was no great reveal. His eyes opened, he smacked his lips. "Minty?"

"Yeah, your mouth is going to taste minty for about twenty minutes. Then you're not going to

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understand taste in quite the same way ever again.”

She pressed a token into his hand. “The bus stop is up that hill and to the left,” she said, pointing. “We’re going somewhere else. Follow us, and I will snap your neck. Do you understand?”

The driver and I both looked at her, somewhat shocked. She didn’t wait for us to get our bearings, instead cutting off the road and into pine trees which clung to the hill. This was rain like I had never seen.

“Where are we going?” I called ahead. Track team and I still couldn’t keep up with her.

“Out of the flood and into darkness,” she said matter-of-factly.

Sure enough, she led me to an enormous tree which had been felled, probably minutes before, by lightning. It created a sort of lean-to space underneath. “Spend the night with me,” she said.

“My parents will be worried sick,” I said feebly.

“Tell them you were trapped in the rain, or tell them—look, trust me. I’m really good at lying. You’ll be fine. I’ll make them so glad you’re still alive, they’ll buy you a new bike.” She bit her lip. “You really are adorable. You’re a virgin, aren’t you?”

My silence was answer enough. She slid under the tree effortlessly, somehow already naked.

I wasn’t sure how I felt about her plan, I thought, as I climbed under the tree with her.

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Disney movies have a strange connotation for me, thanks to Lola. Her mother would be clinking glasses in the other room, making her fourth martini too many, or even in the room with us. In the background Ariel would be singing with whimsical crabs or Beauty would be dancing through the ballroom, and my fingers would be buried inside Lola’s cunt, working to find just the right rhythm to bring her to the edge and keep her there until she couldn’t resist it any longer and was swept up in the sensation.

She called this ‘caving’ Caving meant an eyelid flutter, a sentence which trailed off to nothing but a guttural sigh. Then I would increase the speed and my glistening hand would emerge from under the blanket or pillow on her lap. (Another benefit of always wearing skirts).

To this day, I can’t see a Disney film without being filled with a cyclone of ambivalence. It takes real skill to transform such a seemingly-innocuous piece of Americana into a national sex cult deprogramming regime. I couldn’t have been the only one. How many are haunted by her taste, whenever they see a shot of Ariel, or her smell, when they hear the soundtrack from the Lion King?

I loved her smell. Everything about her was like a musk, almost overpowering but in such a delicious way. In the years since, girls have asked me for my shirts. “One you haven’t washed in days,” they’d say—I thought it was a little strange, but really compelling too, that she should love my stink. But marketing says girls should smell like hyacinths or baby-soft breezes or peach

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cuddles. No one wants that ‘not-so-fresh feeling’. But Lola, she smelled good, you know, but she had this girl-stink like whiskey and leather mini-skirt and pussy. I crave it constantly. I’m getting distracted. I’m sorry.

The first time this happened—and it was not the only time, I was over there every fucking day and we worked our way through the entire Disney back catalog—her mother was playing cards with the two of us and her eleven-year-old sister Evelyn.

Her mother had the glassy look which old alcoholics get, especially those who weren't that bright in the first place. Even then, it was a real feat keeping the pillow or blanket on her lap from jumping around like a balloon full of crickets. Her sister suspected, I think, because she would roll her eyes when we took just a second longer than normal to say “hit me” when playing jackpot. (Plus, who always has a pillow over their lap?) I discovered that I was a pretty good poker player, though. Poker face is no challenge when you're used to covertly fingerfucking a nubile goddess in front of her family day after day.

Lola told me later that day the “dry old cunt” wasn't really her mother. She'd been adopted. Her sister too. I really didn't get much out of her about the past. Her real mother was some kind of gypsy. They taught her everything, then some blind bureaucracy tore it apart. That was all she told me. She didn't want to talk about why they were hiding from her sister's father, why she jumped when a door would slam. I tried, but it would just piss her off.

I thought she was just terrified of intimacy, but looking back, I think she realized she'd have to fuck-initiate half the nation if she was going to have a successful band by age twenty six, when all the rest of the world was listening to dance music. She was the main attraction and that took incredible dedication.

No time for relationships which weren't all played on fast-forward, three years of insanity burned through in a week, over and over and over again. Babylon seemed to explode from out of nowhere, an overnight sensation. The party at the world's end. But I knew better.

There was one thing she said to me once, which sticks with me. She said it from out of nowhere. “Before I die, everyone will know who I am.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because,” she said. And she shut up and moved on to something else. Whatever she gave you, is all you got. That's just how it was.

It's a little funny, and a little sad. I really wanted to be her friend. Yeah. A fourteen-year-old boy. I'm not trying to fool anyone, I couldn't be near her and not be overwhelmed with the need to fuck her. But fucking doesn't have to be a zero-sum game. It doesn't have to be a game at all.

I wanted to see past all the perfectly-honed defenses and plays within plays. The true source of my fixation, was that I desperately wanted to see under her mask. I harbored this sentimentality quietly at first. But toward the end—day twenty-eight or was it nine?—I realized that I loved her, somehow, or that I wanted to love her.

That was that.

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It's been a long time since that week. Twenty years. Twenty years to wonder why I'd given such a shitty speech. Completely out of nowhere, too. We had just been sitting on her porch having a cigarette and it just burbled out of me. "Fuck Lola. I love you, please let me be there for you. Any way. You want to push the envelope, let's do it. You want to... fuck, I'll drop out of school, I'll go anywhere. Do anything. When I'm with you it's like we're invincible. Let's do this. Run away with me. You hate your Mom. Your sister... she could come with, if that's, I mean if that's..." And that's about where my speech ended. No conclusion. Just trailing off into silence, looking for a sign that I wasn't, in fact, measuring out the rope she was going to hang me with.

She heard me, I mean she listened and seemed to understand all the words, but when it came time to respond she just giggled. Like you might giggle when your cat hops into a box and then can't find its way out. Her hand shoved past my jeans and underwear and wrapped around my balls. She squeezed them lightly. She didn't say a word.

For a second, I misread this as a good sign, and gave a giant, goofy grin. Right before she put a gun to my heart and blew my chest out the back of my ribcage.

Figuratively speaking, of course.

In fact, she never spoke to me again. Not taking her hand from my balls, she kissed me hard and then slammed the door in my face.

I stood out there in the cold, crying for an hour. My balls felt like they had shriveled up and crawled inside my body. Like I should cut an incision along the side of my thigh and shove them inside there and sew it shut, cut holes in my chest and sew my arms inside, then my legs, my whole miserable body stitched into a quivering, quadriplegic abortion. I called her a hundred times. I banged on the door, howling senselessly.

The door eventually opened a crack. Evelyn peered out at me, a half-lit cigarette dangling from her lip. For the first time, I realized she looked far more wise than her years. Eleven? I had this crazy thought that she wasn't human, that neither her, nor her sister, were human.

"Listen," she said.

"Oh. Alright," I said, the wind suddenly blown out of my sails.

She seemed to struggle a moment, and then exploded. "Do you have any idea how many times I've had to deliver this speech for my sister? She's in there, right now, laughing her ass off. I don't know how to put this. She's a psychotic slut, okay? My sister is a slut. She's been one for as long as I can fucking remember, which is at least several thousand years. She is the Queen of the Sluts, the reincarnation of the Whore of Babylon. My adopted mom's a martini glass. My step-dad is a fuck up of an ex-Marine, who thinks the way to be a real man is to beat women. And I run this place. Me. I don't get a fucking childhood. I pay the bills with Mom's welfare money and read fantasy novels. That's my life. And you're standing out on my porch, at two in the morning making a scene, and I'm supposed to feel something? Please! Just pull it together and get on with your life. She will never speak to you again. Welcome to the rest of your life. Please have it elsewhere."

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I stopped crying. I had never heard an eleven-year-old say something like that in my entire life. I was too stunned to cry. Either something in me snapped, or my entire perspective shifted somehow, I can't explain it, but I went from being heartbroken to just fucking confused.

And that feeling lasted a long time afterward.

In fact, I don't think it ever left.

I never got a chance to find out what their story really was, of course. The next day, the apartment was empty, like I had built her out of wet dreams and nebulous fantasy. Bare. Not a hair or speck of dust.

I was afraid to ask the apartment maintenance if there had been someone living there. I mean, what if they said no?

This left me with no option. I had to move on. But how?

My life before her was a monotonous haze. My life since has been that of a junkie, chasing the rush of that first, perfect hit. For years, I compared girls to Lola in my mind. From some of them, I even got the thing she would never do. They dropped their guards. I could actually be their friend, we were fellow humans. Lilith was on some other plane of existence, which I just happened to touch for a moment because it suited her, I guess. When my girlfriends offered me their hearts, every time, it would hit me that they weren't the right flavor. They weren't psychopaths.

She also completely scrambled my expectations about other people. If I called Lola a slut, she would grin ear to ear. If I had punched her in the face, I bet she would've punched right back without hesitation. That would've been foreplay, and tame at that.

One time, we broke into someone's condo. She smashed a bottle of expensive stolen tequila over the bedpost, and shoved me so hard my body punctured the drywall like a bullet through fabric. We fucked bloody in the broken glass, inside that wall, on the floor, on their kitchen table, leaving a trail of sex and crimson right out their door.

Each time I realized it wasn't going to work, I'd fuck them just one more time, imagining that I was somehow giving them to her. I knew it was twisted, but that just made it more appealing. If they'd let me, I'd even brand them with her ouroboros symbol, in that tender curve between belly and hip.

She was an artist and her art was breaking people. She cracked us open, first one at a time and then she went mass-market with it, tearing out people's emotional guts with her body and her music, tearing a path across the nation. It wasn't until years later, when I saw Lilith perform with

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Babylon, that I was certain I hadn't invented the whole thing. I tracked her career like I was a twelve-year-old girl and she was the lead in a teen boy band.

I didn't have the art that Lilith did. They probably just left with a narrative about some dickhead who went psycho boy and dumped them out of the blue. Couldn't commit. But maybe I pulled off some of her artistry (a lucky shot) once or twice.

Sometimes, I even saw them show up with her later, like she had some kind of homing beacon in her crotch, something with the wattage to rip your heart out of your chest from a thousand miles away.

It made me happy. I hoped some small part of what Lilith—Lola—had given me was for them, too. I wasn't some kind of monster.

When I heard she was probably dead, I wrote something. More like it was written through me, somehow. It hangs on the wall now, surrounded by all these half completed sketches, a sort of altar to this stranger who haunts my life.

She rubbed the skin off your headstone of a sternum, and painted a sad picture of herself in your eyes. We fell in love with that little peep-show projection on the inside of an iris, pictures which amount to nothing more than the thirsty moon over a spot of bloody ground. Those weren't the nothings we restless sleepwalkers knew, no place, no home, no song. So we heard her and we followed, until she went where we couldn't follow.

She went down beyond the mountains and disappeared between the crease of sky and land, like a great eyelid folding shut. No one knows what happened out in the Black Hills, but I imagine she lies buried in a rusty coffin under the stars. She had Marilyn's enchanting haze, Hendrix's cool, Morrison's smoldering insanity, but the grave was still surely bare. Not that it mattered. Her face was burned into all our minds, forever young, the mantra of every generation's counter-culture. And on nights when the desert crickets sing her tune, they say one day she will rise again. On that day, there is no telling the kind of vengeance she'll demand of us. Fair is fair.

They say, when she fell from Heaven she wore a crown of jagged stars that slit the skies throat. They say she loved them all, in the secret corners of their shallow sleep. Strangers, at the last. They say a lot of things. They're all lies. Everything is already written.

When I saw how huge Babylon got, how some politicians scapegoated them for the downfall of the 'American way of life', I started to realize her game was a lot larger than that. When I saw it all come down, I knew. Ultimately, her failure was our failure. I mean, a people should be held responsible for the behavior of their Gods, right? Her pride was our pride.

I'm quite certain about this. She will be coming back. Maybe not tomorrow. Maybe not for a thousand years. Who am I to say?

I turn away. Close my eyes. In my mind I draw her eyebrow, the mouth, the nose... I lose it again. But I'm getting closer.

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About The Author

James Curcio once beat a bear at chess, and Stephen Hawking in a boxing match. He tells lies for money.

It lives with a harem of feral lesbians and cats somewhere in the mountains, sustained exclusively on mochas, lion milk, and raw honey. In the springtime it needs to feed.

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