

"One of the most disturbing novels I've read in a long time. It possesses an unnering air of documentary reality." —Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

LESS THAN

ZERO

# BRET EASTON ELLIS

AUTHOR OF AMERICAN PSYCHO

Bret Easton Ellis

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For Joe McGinniss

"This is the game that moves as you play..."

- X

"There's a feeling I get when I look to the West..."

- Led Zeppelin

People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles. This is the first thing I hear when I come back to the city. Blair picks me up from LAX and mutters this under her breath as her car drives up the onramp. She says, "People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles." Though that sentence shouldn't bother me, it stays in my mind for an uncomfortably long time. Nothing else seems to matter. Not the fact that I'm eighteen and it's December and the ride on the plane had been rough and the couple from Santa Barbara, who were sitting across from me in first class, had gotten pretty drunk. Not the mud that had splattered the legs of my jeans, which felt kind of cold and loose, earlier that day at an airport in New Hampshire. Not the stain on the arm of the wrinkled, damp shirt I wear, a shirt which had looked fresh and clean this morning. Not the tear on the neck of my gray argyle vest, which seems vaguely more eastern than before, especially next to Blair's clean tight jeans and her pale-blue T-shirt. All of this seems irrelevant next to that one sentence. It seems easier to hear that people are afraid to merge rather than "I'm pretty sure Muriel is anorexic" or the singer on the radio crying out about magnetic waves. Nothing else seems to matter to me but those ten words. Not the warm winds, which seem to propel the car down the empty asphalt freeway, or the faded smell of marijuana which still faintly permeates Blair's car. All it comes down to is that I'm a boy coming home for a month and meeting someone whom I haven't seen for four months and people are afraid to merge.

Blair drives off the freeway and comes to a red light. A heavy gust of wind rocks the car for a moment and Blair smiles and says something about maybe putting the top up and turns to a different radio station. Coming to my house, Blair has to stop the car since there are these five workmen lifting the remains of palm trees that have fallen during the winds and placing the leaves and pieces of dead bark in a big red truck, and Blair smiles again. She stops at my house and the gate's open and I get out of the car, surprised to feel how dry and hot it is. I stand there for a pretty long time and Blair, after helping me lift the suitcases out of the trunk, grins at me and asks, "What's wrong?" and I say, "Nothing," and Blair says, "You

look pale," and I shrug and we say goodbye and she gets into her car and drives away.

Nobody's home. The air conditioner is on and the house smells like pine. There's a note on the kitchen table that tells me that my mother and sisters are out, Christmas shopping. From where I'm standing I can see the dog lying by the pool, breathing heavily, asleep, its fur ruffled by the wind. I walk upstairs, past the new maid, who smiles at me and seems to understand who I am, and past my sisters' rooms, which still both look the same, only with different *GQ* cutouts pasted on the wall, and enter my room and see that it hasn't changed. The walls are still white; the records are still in place; the television hasn't been moved; the venetian blinds are still open, just as I had left them. It looks like my mother and the new maid, or maybe the old maid, cleaned out my closet while I was gone. There's a pile of comic books on my desk with a note on top of them that reads, "Do you still want these?"; also a message that Julian called and a card that says "Fuck Christmas" on it. I open it and it says "Let's Fuck Christmas Together" on the inside, an invitation to Blair's Christmas party. I put the card down and notice that it's beginning to get really cold in my room.

I take my shoes off and lie on the bed and feel my brow to see if I have a fever. I think I do. And with my hand on my forehead I look up with caution at the poster encased in glass that hangs on the wall above my bed, but it hasn't changed either. It's the promotional poster for an old Elvis Costello record. Elvis looks past me, with this wry, ironic smile on his lips, staring out the window. The word "Trust" hovering over his head, and his sunglasses, one lens red, the other blue, pushed down past the ridge of his nose so that you can see his eyes, which are slightly off center. The eyes don't look at me, though. They only look at whoever's standing by the window, but I'm too tired to get up and stand by the window.

I pick up the phone and call Julian, amazed that I actually can remember his number, but there's no answer. I sit up, and through the venetian blinds I can see the palm trees shaking wildly, actually bending, in the hot winds, and then I stare back at the poster and then turn away and then look back again at the smile and the mocking eyes, the red and blue glasses, and I can still

hear people are afraid to merge and I try to get over the sentence, blank it out. I turn on MTV and tell myself I could get over it and go to sleep if I had some Valium and then I think about Muriel and feel a little sick as the videos begin to flash by.

I bring Daniel to Blair's party that night and Daniel is wearing sunglasses and a black wool jacket and black jeans. He's also wearing black suede gloves because he cut himself badly on a piece of glass a week earlier in New Hampshire. I had gone with him to the emergency room at the hospital and had watched as they cleaned the wound and washed the blood off and started to sew in the wire until I started feeling sick and then I went and sat in the waiting room at five o'clock in the morning and heard The Eagles sing "New Kid in Town" and I wanted to come back. We're standing at the door of Blair's house in Beverly Hills and Daniel complains that the gloves are sticking to the wires and are too tight, but he doesn't take them off because he doesn't want people to see the thin silver wires sticking out of the skin on his thumb and fingers. Blair answers the door.

"Hey, gorgeous," Blair exclaims. She's wearing a black leather jacket and matching pants and no shoes and she hugs me and then looks at Daniel.

"Well, who's this?" she asks, grinning.

"This is Daniel. Daniel, this is Blair," I say.

Blair offers her hand and Daniel smiles and shakes it softly.

"Well, come on in. Merry Christmas."

There are two Christmas trees, one in the living room and one in the den and both have twinkling dark-red lights coloring them. There are people at the party from high school, most of whom I haven't seen since graduation and they all stand next to the two huge trees. Trent, a male model I know, is there.

"Hey, Clay," Trent says, a red-and-green-plaid scarf wrapped around his neck.

"Trent," I say.

"How are you, babes?"

"Great. Trent, this is Daniel. Daniel, this is Trent."

Trent offers his hand and Daniel smiles and adjusts his sunglasses and lightly shakes it.

"Hey, Daniel," Trent says. "Where do you go to school?"

"With Clay," Daniel says. "Where do you go?"

"U.C.L.A. or as the Orientals like to call it, U.C.R.A." Trent imitates an old Japanese man, eyes slit, head bowed, front teeth stuck out in parody, and then laughs drunkenly.

"I go to the University of Spoiled Children," Blair says, still grinning, running her fingers through her long blond hair.

"Where?" asks Daniel.

"U.S.C.," she says.

"Oh, yeah," he says. "That's right."

Blair and Trent laugh and she grabs his arm to balance herself for a moment. "Or Jew.S.C.," she says, almost gasping.

"Or Jew.C.L.A.," Trent says, still laughing.

Finally Blair stops laughing and brushes past me to the door, telling me that I should try the punch.

"I'll get the punch," Daniel says. "You want some, Trent?"

"No thanks." Trent looks at me and says, "You look pale."

I notice that I do, compared to Trent's deep, dark tan and most of the other people's complexions around the room. "I've been in New Hampshire for four months."

Trent reaches into his pocket. "Here," he says, handing me a card. "This is the address of a tanning salon on Santa Monica. Now, it's not artificial lighting or anything like that, and you don't have to rub Vitamin E capsules all over your bod. This thing is called an Uva Bath and what they do is they dye your skin."

I stop listening to Trent after a while and look over at three boys, friends of Blair's I don't know, who go to U.S.C., all tan and blond and one is singing along with the music coming out of the speakers.

"It works," Trent says.

"What works?" I ask, distracted.

"An Uva Bath. Uva Bath. Look at the card, dude."

"Oh yeah." I look at the card. "They dye your skin, right?"

"Right."

"Okay."

Pause.

"What have you been doing?" Trent asks.

"Unpacking," I say. "What about you?"

"Well," he smiles proudly. "I got accepted by this modeling agency, a really good one," he assures me. "And guess who's going to be not only on the cover of *International Male* in two months, but who is also the month of June in U.C.L.A.'s college man calendar?"

"Who?" I ask.