

"THE BEARD"

Week One

On a Wednesday morning, having woefully underestimated rush hour traffic in Los Angeles, Calvin Sands had quickly given up his dream of catching a morning glimpse of Santa Monica's fabled beaches. Instead he was simply praying that somehow, some way, he might manage to show up for the first day of his new internship at the designated time.

Weaving his ancient, not thoroughly reliable, and far from undented VW bug through a dazzling array of luxury cars – Beemers, Lexi, Range Rovers, Porsches, and the occasional Prius, plus every so often a Tesla, Bentley or Maserati – that would have been inconceivable on his home turf of Elizabeth, New Jersey, Calvin couldn't help but feel like the only person in what was known locally as the Westside who was traveling without the benefit of air conditioning, Bluetooth, or a sense of belonging.

With a fear that in addition to being late he had also somehow managed to get lost, what little was left of his excitement and anticipation was rapidly giving way to not-so-quiet desperation when Calvin suddenly slowed down – eliciting honks galore – then, with a dose of Garden State audacity, swung the VW into a questionable U-turn.

Spotting that rarest of sights on a major SoCal thoroughfare – a pedestrian who didn't look like a tourist or a homeless person – Calvin turned off the vintage Slim Harpo track he was listening to and engendered another chorus of honks by cutting across three lanes, then pulled to a halt in a No Stopping Zone so as to address the well-dressed guy in his mid-twenties who, after kicking a rock, seemed to be wandering aimlessly.

"Any clue how I find 11201 Olympic?" Calvin asked.

Rousted from a mood that looked to be equal parts anger and self-pity, the pedestrian eyed

Calvin for a moment as though sizing him up. "Gadzooks?" he finally asked.

Calvin nodded proudly in response, which engendered first a frown, then a gesture toward a monolithic, seemingly soulless building.

"Lots of luck," was what Calvin was told with what was clearly more than a measure of bitterness.

Inside an eighth-floor orientation room decorated with a style that was often termed, by both fans and detractors, Neo-Jetsons, a stern but attractive woman nearing forty whose name, Beverly Steele, led to her being called (though never to her face) *The Steel Maiden*, glanced at a clipboard, then strode toward the podium at the far end.

Imperiously, she faced the eleven still anonymous young people – seven men, four women – who were waiting anxiously for the business at hand to get under way.

"If I may –" Beverly began, only to stop when suddenly the door flew open, and in burst Calvin. Toting a tattered Howlin' Wolf backpack, and wearing an anomalous outfit of denim shirt and cargo pants, he instantly became self-conscious as he glanced around at those who were supposed to be his peers. Almost all of them, though in different ways, seemed to radiate wealth, worldliness, and sophistication – a few dressed in the latest from GQ or Vogue, some in *haute* preppy, others in boho chic complete with tattoos and piercings.

"And you are?" Beverly Steele asked none too happily.

"C-Calvin Sands."

Beverly studied Calvin momentarily, then gestured for him to take a seat amidst the others.

Calvin tried to maneuver his way inconspicuously into the second row. But with all eyes upon him, he nervously lost his footing and tripped over a blond patrician who would have looked completely at home in a Ralph Lauren ad.

"Sorry," Calvin whispered, only to receive a look of total disdain.

Settling into a seat at last, Calvin fixed his attention on Beverly Steele, who deftly underscored her dismay by allowing a moment to pass.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Beverly stated with what seemed to be irony once she resumed, "look to your left."

Everyone immediately did as told.

"Now look to your right."

Again the entire group swiftly obeyed.

"One of you will not be here six or seven weeks from now."

Receiving the collective sigh she expected, plus a cringe from Calvin, Beverly smiled.

"Think that's bad? Then please be assured that a few more of you will be let go – or, perhaps wisely, choose of your own volition to leave – in the days and weeks after that."

Instead of a sigh, a collective groan filled the room, together with a wince from Calvin.

"You've heard," Beverly Steele went on, "about the Darwinian concept known as survival of the fittest. Well for interns here, it's survival not just of the fittest, but also of the smartest. And hungriest. And most determined. Are you catching my drift?"

With no great zeal, the members of the group all nodded.

"I can't hear you," Beverly exclaimed.

"Yes," the entire group mustered unhappily.

"But the good news?" Beverly added. "For those of you who make it across the finish line, the sky's the fucking limit!"

Somehow those words did not entirely manage to fill the room with glee.

"So welcome to Gadzooks," Beverly announced. "And if you've still got an appetite, there's coffee next door in the conference room, plus bagels, Pepto Bismol, and Tums."

As the others, still reeling from the unwelcoming welcoming speech, staggered out, Calvin hesitantly approached Beverly Steele.

"Sorry I was late," he said softly

"You should be."

"Mind if I ask a question?"

"About?"

"Where to live."

"What am I, Craigslist?"

Seeing Calvin flinch, then start to fiddle with his hands, Beverly looked for a moment as though she was about to soften. "Nervous?"

"Should I be?"

"Only if you're a sentient creature," she said, showing little mercy. "Let me explain to you what survival of the fittest means. No help. No postings. No bullshit about *Getting Acclimated* on our website. And no category called *Roommates Needed*. Get it?"

Calvin bit his lower lip for a moment, then nodded.

"But just so you know, there is a *but*."

"Okay –"

"If I can make it –"

"Yeah?"

"Maybe so can you."

"Think so?"

"It depends."

"On?"

"How badly you want it," Beverly said.

Without another word, she turned and walked out the door.

Stepping into the conference room after catching his breath, Calvin couldn't help but get

the impression that he had somehow crashed the wrong party.

Squeezing his way toward the food, he made an effort to smile at those who were sipping coffee and nibbling on bagels, but to no avail. With cliques clearly having already formed, he found himself with a sense of being extraneous almost to the point of invisibility. Or worse, a pariah.

Far from thrilled, Calvin grabbed a bagel with poppy seeds, then started to resign himself to being alone when he spotted a shy Latina who, like him, was obviously being ostracized.

"I'm Calvin," he said by way of introduction.

"Violeta."

"Where you from?"

"El Salvador via Pomona College."

Using his partially gnawed bagel, Calvin gestured toward those who were ostensibly their peers. "Nothing like being made to feel welcome."

"We're already the top two candidates."

"In what?"

"The pool that's started."

"What kind of pool?"

"To see who's the first one bounced."

"No shit?"

Violeta shook her head.

"You pissed?" Calvin asked.

"Maybe I'll have tokenism on my side with no other Latinas around," answered Violeta with a shrug. "How about you?"

"I don't know whether to be pissed, motivated –"

"Or?" Violeta asked when Calvin hesitated.

"Turn into a psycho-killer."

"You don't look much like a psycho-killer."

"Just psycho, huh?"

"Well –" said Violeta

"But I'm working on the killer part," Calvin joked as into the conference room stepped a spiky-haired guy not yet thirty who was clearly proud of what he took to be his own importance.

Banging his fist on a table to get attention, the newcomer waited until everyone was looking at him. "Time's a-wasting, boys and girls," he then said haughtily.

With the spiky-haired guy leading the way, the interns returned to the orientation room, where a handsome, blond, athletic man who looked like he could still be the captain of the Yale crew team stood beside Beverly Steele.

"My name, so that you're in the know, is Matt Donnelly," the guy who would soon become known amongst the interns as Mr. Spiky announced once everyone was seated. "You've already had a chance to meet the estimable and formidable Beverly Steele. And this, for those who didn't interview with him, is our distinguished head of marketing, my friend and accomplice in crime Brad Tucker."

Tucker took a step forward, then gazed at the group in front of him. "Lots of companies like to claim that they're cutting edge. Right?"

As one, the interns nodded.

"You call that an answer?" Matt Donnelly piped in.

"Yes," said the interns.

"So fucking nineties," Tucker stated. "We at Gadzooks don't have to bill ourselves as hip, edgy, or any of that cornball shit. We just go about our business, leaving our would-be

competitors –"

"– The sinister places we love to refer to as Yoo-Hoo and Goo-Goo," Donnelly interjected.

"– Far behind as we create, adapt, and personalize internet and smart phone technology in never-before-dreamed of ways." The epitome of smugness, Tucker turned to Matt Donnelly.

"Am I right?"

"Fuckin'-A!" Donnelly affirmed.

"Not that it'll matter for the ones who don't make the cut," Tucker continued. "But as I point to you, please tell us your name, where you're from –"

"And any pertinent detail," Donnelly added.

Tucker pointed to a thin guy in a Versace suit.

"Imran Habib, from Pakistan, where I was on the national polo team," came the response, which confirmed to Calvin the loftiness of his competition. "Then Stanford, with a junior year at the London School of Economics."

Next Tucker pointed to a very cute Asian woman whose hair was dyed bright red.

"Amy Kawasaki – B.A. Summa Cum Laude with a major in physics and a minor in cinema at Berkeley, followed by post-grad work in marketing en route to an MBA there. Oh yes, I'm originally from Tokyo, which is why I'm bilingual – trilingual if you add pretty good Italian – then Rancho Santa Fe."

Calvin's heart sunk even deeper, then he watched Tucker point toward a fastidiously foppish guy, who promptly smiled as he prepared to speak.

"Robert Williams, Newport, Rhode Island – Bogota, where Dad was Ambassador – then Williams College, which, contrary to popular belief, despite a tradition that's lasted for generations, was not actually named for us. Oh, and Phi Beta Kappa, as well as having had pieces published in both the *New Yorker* and the *Atlantic*."

Feeling more and more nauseous with each passing moment, Calvin turned toward Violeta

and whispered. "Got a knife?" he whispered.

"If I did, I'd be using it on myself."

"Then how about cyanide?"

Tucker, meanwhile, pointed toward a tall woman who may well have been both wardrobe and accessorized by Rachel Zoe.

"Samantha Steinberg, Great Neck, B.A. Tisch School at NYU, MBA Wharton – ex-cheerleader, varsity tennis, and president of Model U.N."

Next Tucker turned toward a rugged specimen in a torn Bob Marley t-shirt and a motorcycle jacket.

"Bruce Springsteen, Asbury Park, New Jersey," was the response.

Everyone – Calvin included – shared a much needed laugh, then the speaker continued.

"Actually, Harlan Brooks, III – Harley, to my friends, as in the bike I ride – Darien, Cape Cod, a couple of jail cells, then Dartmouth."

Then, after scanning the interns who had not yet spoken, it was toward the blond patrician over whom Calvin tripped earlier that Tucker pointed.

"Jonathan Olson," he stood up and said with great forcefulness and pride. "Houston raised, Princeton educated, captain of the lacrosse team, then Oxford. Oh, and my father's in *Who's-Who*."

Having by then reached his breaking point, Calvin grimaced when Tucker leveled a finger in his direction, then uncharacteristically threw caution to the wind.

"Calvin Sands from the wrong side of the tracks in what is decidedly not a garden spot in the Garden State: Elizabeth, New Jersey. Then Rutgers on the prestigious five-year work-study, drive-a-delivery-truck-during-the-summer plan. And having spurned *Who's-Who*, my dad opted for the distinguished group known as *So-What*."

For a moment there was not a sound to be heard anywhere, while Violeta gaped but others

averted their eyes.

Only when irrepressible Harley Brooks let out a guffaw was the strained silence finally broken. Then Brad Tucker found himself faced with the unpleasant task of focusing on the remaining interns.

Twenty minutes later, like a mother hen leading her chicks, Beverly Steele headed down the hallway as she gave the interns a tour of the Gadzook offices.

"This is the tech command post, the brain center where our search engines are constantly updated," she said as she pointed out a gleaming facility in which an array of scientists, engineers, and geeks labored in an environment that also featured nerf balls, strange posters, and assorted snacks and toys. "This is the spot in which new apps are conceived, exciting technologies are dreamed up, and conventional behavior or thinking – having been banished by royal proclamation – rarely dares to make an appearance."

After allowing her flock to take a lengthy gander, Beverly was about to lead on when toward her came a guy who looked like an aging surfer, complete with a tan, a three-day growth, unkempt hair starting to turn gray, shaggy torn jeans, and flip-flops.

"This," Beverly said as she gestured toward the self-satisfied figure who was bopping in their direction, "is the one and only Steve Norris, Head of Product Development, which in Gadzooks-speak means, among other things, that he's the King of Apps."

Norris glanced at the interns, paying particular attention to the females, then gave a half-bow. "Welcome one and all," he said theatrically.

"For now," Beverly added.

"Hey," said Norris, "like they say about every bodacious wave in surfing, dig each and every moment while you can."

Vividly aware of the kind of impression he made, Norris smiled, then headed onward.

Shepherding her charges in the opposite direction, Beverly stopped a moment later to point out yet another key spot.

"Here we have the mail room," she announced. "Which will likely be as far as some of you ever progress."

Not surprisingly those words elicited a gulp from several members of the group. But before resuming her expedition, Beverly suddenly noticed someone else who seemed even more incongruous than Norris, and not only because of his dreadlocks, his faded 76ers t-shirt, his blue warmup pants, and his vintage Air Jordans.

"This," Beverly said, referring to the black guy of thirty who was approaching, "is the man I call our secret weapon, Alonzo Stevens. Everything good, Alonzo?"

"If everything were really good, nobody would need me around here," Alonzo replied.

"Alonzo," Beverly explained to the interns, "is the guy that I and other knowledgeable people around here turn to when all our IT geniuses from Cal Tech and MIT can't find a way to make things work. Right, Alonzo?"

"If you say so."

The interns eyed Alonzo silently – all, that is, but Jonathan Olson, who grandly stepped toward him.

"What it is, my brother?" Jonathan said, extending a fist so as to fist-bump with Alonzo. But to the delight of Calvin, Alonzo seemed not the least bit pleased and therefore failed to reciprocate.

"Since when are we brothers?" Alonzo asked with explicit disgust.

The other interns – Calvin foremost among them – watched intently as Alonzo, having spurned what he took to be Jonathan's patronizing gesture, continued his journey down the hall.

Lunchtime. As out from the building stepped several of the interns, Calvin, ever hopeful,

addressed those in closest proximity to him: Imran, Robert, and Samantha.

"You guys want to grab a bite?"

Looks were exchanged, then Robert spoke. "We've... uhh... got plans?"

Undaunted, Calvin turned to another guy: Jonathan.

"Want to grab a sandwich?"

"I'm not available for that," Jonathan answered with what sounded like undisguised condescension.

Clearly rejected, Calvin looked around and realized that there was only one other intern left nearby: Violeta.

"Buy you a salad or a something?" he asked.

Violeta pulled a brown paper bag out of her purse.

"I brought an empanada. Want half?"

"That's okay, but thanks."

As Violeta wandered off, Calvin couldn't help but feel alone – incredibly alone – both literally and figuratively.

He took a deep breath as though contemplating his fate, then wandered toward the side of the Gadzooks building, where he noticed a sign for a ground-floor breakfast-and-lunch type place called Cash & Carrie.

Spotless yet inviting, adorned with photos of various sites in China – the Great Wall, Tiananmen Square, the Yungang Buddhist Grottoes, and the Muslim Quarter in Xi'an among others – plus a blackboard listing several Chinese specials along with standard gringo salads, sandwiches, smoothies, and wraps, the joint was jumping when Calvin stepped in.

Catching sight of the young Asian woman at the Order Counter, who was striking in a surprisingly artsy, bohemian kind of way that seemed at the same time both incongruous yet

somehow appropriate, Calvin stopped and stared.

And he was still staring when spiky-haired Matt Donnelly, who was about to leave with a take-out order, spotted him.

"Hot, huh?" Donnelly asked, gesturing toward the attractive young woman.

"Yeah."

"Conrad, right?"

"Calvin."

"Now you know why there's a pool."

"To see who's the first intern bounced?"

Donnelly shook his head. "To be the first to get into her pants."

With a shit-eating grin, Donnelly patted Calvin on the shoulder, then headed for the door.

Calvin frowned as he watched him go, then bucked the crowd so as to approach the counter.

There, he stood and stared silently at the pretty woman, whose name tag identified her as the eponymous Carrie – until, that is, she playfully broke his reverie.

"Planning on ordering?" she asked. "Or should I just charge you rent?"

"What's good?"

"Well, we've got fish lips... Squirrel snouts... Eel elbows..."

Calvin grinned. Then an older Chinese woman, whose name tag said May, leaned toward him.

"Like Asian food?"

"I guess."

"Try the Hainanese chicken," Carrie suggested.

Having strolled alone through the side streets south of Olympic Boulevard while chomping on his take-out lunch, Calvin wolfed the last forkfuls of rice, then tossed the empty container

into a nearby dumpster.

Coming upon a small park, he wandered in, then noticed a familiar figure shooting hoops solo: Alonzo Stevens.

Calvin watched for a couple of moments, then approached only when the basketball, having gotten away from Alonzo, rolled toward him.

"Want some company?" Calvin asked as he retrieved the ball and tossed it toward Alonzo.

"Not especially."

"And here I thought maybe you'd be different."

"Then who?"

"My wonderfully welcoming fellow interns."

"Even if I am, that doesn't mean I want company."

Calvin stiffened momentarily, then turned to go, only to be surprised by a voice.

"Yo!" Alonzo yelled.

Calvin faced him.

"Nothing personal," Alonzo explained. "Eight hours a day – five days a week – I've got to put up with people with whom I've got zippity-doo-dah in common. The last thing I want during my little bit of free time at lunch is more of the same."

Disappointed, Calvin scrutinized Alonzo for a couple of moments. Then, without another word, he turned and trudged back for what he figured would be an afternoon of misery.

For Calvin, who was unhappily ensconced in the cheapest East Hollywood motel he could find, a dinner of tacos from a stand frequented by Mexican laborers led to a night of soul searching, punctuated by the sounds of shots being fired; explosions here and there of hip-hop, salsa, and mariachi music; plus a medley of sirens from police cars, fire engines, and ambulances.

Then there was the additional pleasure of periodic buzzing by helicopters overhead.

That he would be alone in California for a few days until his initiation at Gadzooks began had always been a given for Calvin, one he was able to live with and accept. But that he felt far more alone after the first day of an internship which had initially seemed like a dream come true, and for which he had made the solo drive cross-country, was infinitely worse.

Unable to sleep with all that was going on both externally and internally, Calvin resorted to an old trick of his: making lists. First up, as a longtime music fan who had spent countless hours on Youtube and was known to hit thrift shops and swap meets in search of old vinyl, came an attempt to pinpoint his all-time top ten favorite artists or groups. Ray Charles was a certainty, as was Lou Reed, whether alone or with the Velvet Underground. Solomon Burke was also a sure thing. So, too, was Nina Simone. The Stones were considered briefly, then dropped because their later work ranged, in his estimation, from imitative to lame. Cyndi Lauper might well have made the cut if the rest of her work had been anywhere near as memorable as "Time After Time," or as effervescent as "Girls Just Want To Have Fun." Southside Johnny, as someone truer to Calvin's native New Jersey than Springsteen, was a strong contender. So, too, was Thelonious Monk, who hit more responsive chords for him than greats like Coltrane or Miles. And Willy DeVille, whether alone or as part of Mink DeVille. Close, but not quite close enough, were people like Irma Thomas, whose "I Wish Someone Would Care" Calvin revered, and Fontella Bass, singer of the unforgettable "Rescue Me." Then there was what he termed the esoterica: Bobby "Blue" Bland, whose "Two Steps From The Blues" album stood out from the rest of his work; Slim Harpo, whose output of swamp music was small but tasty; and New Orleans legends like Professor Longhair, Benny Spellman, and Ernie K-Doe.

Calvin understood full well that preferring King Sunny Ade, Little Walter, and Jacques Brel to Tupac, Jay-Z, and Beyonce set him apart from most of his contemporaries, as did his

lack of interest in Taylor Swift and his total dismissal of Justin Beiber. But unlike his outsider status at Gadzooks, distancing himself from those he considered musically challenged was willful, deliberate, and of his own volition.

In a strange way it made him feel special, a member of the cognoscenti, someone who knew that the Stones' "You Better Move On" was a so-so cover of Arthur Alexander, and that Janis Joplin's "Get It While You Can" was recorded first, and better, by the great Howard Tate.

In the same way, it was a source of pride to think of Beatles fans as musical dilettantes, people who were too myopic – or perhaps too racist – to appreciate acts like Little Richard or the Isley Brothers, whom the Brits initially aspired to be.

Though Calvin never quite decided on a definitive top ten that night, the exercise was nevertheless a success, since it inevitably tired him out sufficiently so that he was ultimately able to get a couple of hours sleep.

Having learned the hard way about rush hour traffic, Calvin headed west the next morning with far more time to spare, but with significantly diminished enthusiasm.

Questions that had periodically gnawed at him for years – *Who am I? What am I? What in hell am I supposed do with my life?* – ricocheted through his mind as he attempted to gird himself for more embarrassment, more disappointment, and in all likelihood more isolation.

Stunned even more than before by the solipsism of Los Angeles drivers, all of whom seemed to be yacking away on Bluetooth while acting as though signaling before changing lanes would be too high a price to pay, Calvin did his best to practice forbearance. That, despite the fact that for people like him from New Jersey, *forbearance* was no more a part of the everyday vocabulary than *beatitude*, *serenity*, or *bliss*.

The result was that even with repeated attempts to focus on his breath and think happy thoughts, Calvin was nonetheless boiling as, while listening to James Carr singing "At The Dark

End Of The Street," he again made a questionable U-turn, then followed an Audi convertible into the Gadzooks garage.

Down a ramp went Calvin's rickety Volkswagon, which pulled into a space just as a silver Prius headed into the spot beside it.

Out from the hybrid stepped Beverly Steele, who surprised Calvin by acknowledging him with what seemed almost to be a smile.

"Find an apartment?" she asked.

"And give up the wonderful smell of gunpowder in the morning?"

"That bad?"

"It could be worse."

"You mean like Baghdad? Or Nairobi?"

Both of them started to chuckle, then turned to watch a slew of expensive vehicles pass: a Porsche driven by Imran Habib... a Mercedes driven by Robert Williams... a Harley ridden by Harley Brooks... a Lexus with Amy Kawasaki at the wheel.

"Like what you're up against?" Beverly asked.

"I don't even know what to call 'em."

"The sons and daughters of privilege."

Then up came a shiny red Corvette manned by haughty Jonathan Olson.

"So what do you call him?" Calvin wondered aloud.

"Mr. Oil Spill.

Calvin responded with what Beverly took to be a what's-that-mean expression.

"Guess whose daddy is Senior VP at Occidental Petroleum," she explained.

As Calvin acknowledged the comment, into view came a beautifully restored vintage turquoise-and-white Bel Air convertible with a dapper guy in his forties at the wheel.

"Who is that?" asked Calvin, clearly impressed.

"Our Supreme Master."

"Wesley Phillips drives a '57 Chevy?"

"And a '64 ½ Mustang. And a 1960 Bentley. And whatever else he happens to want.

Know much about him?"

"Doesn't everyone?" asked Calvin. "In the technology world, he's both a pioneer and an icon."

"And you're impressed?"

"Aren't you?"

"Oh, absolutely," Beverly stated.

Yet somehow Calvin had the sense that her words did not quite ring entirely true.

A few minutes later, Violeta was walking through the halls of Gadzooks engulfed in gloom when Calvin entered.

"You're in luck," she said wearily.

"In what way?"

"You got the mail room."

"That's good?"

"Yours truly's in Siberia."

"Give me that in English."

"The Media Room, where there's nothing but fifteen TV screens and me."

"Which may not be so bad," Calvin said.

"How so?"

"Not likely to be the first place they look when they're searching for someone to cut."

As Calvin's point hit home, Violeta brightened somewhat.

"Think so?" she asked.

"What do I know?" he answered.

Far from thrilled to be stationed in the Mail Room, several of the seemingly anointed interns were sorting through piles of letters, trade papers, and magazines in a desultory way when Samantha Steinberg turned to the guy closest to her, a Filipino from Cal Tech named Rolando Dango.

"So what's your take on Tucker?" she asked.

"To me, he's a big dick," Rolando replied.

From across the room, where he'd been silently going through a pile of mail on his own, Robert Williams suddenly expressed interest.

"Who's got a big dick?" Robert asked.

Before anyone could answer, into the room stepped Calvin.

The others took notice of him briefly, without uttering a peep, then went right back to what they were doing.

"Guess I'm the invisible man," Calvin announced. "Any of you interested in getting up a softball game this Saturday?"

No answer was forthcoming, so Calvin, determined not to be daunted, walked over toward Robert.

"Bob, right?" Calvin asked.

"Robert."

"Feel like playing?"

"Please tell me you're joking."

Calvin shrugged, then turned toward Samantha and Rolando.

"How about you two?" he inquired. "Softball? Volleyball? Skinny-dipping?"

"I'll be sailing," Rolando said coldly.

"And I'm flying up to San Francisco," Samantha responded.

Those words, however, were enough to arouse Robert's interest again.

"Want company?" he asked.

Cash & Carrie was once more jumping at lunchtime when spiky-haired Matt Donnelly, with a bag of take-out food in hand, started making his way from the counter.

As he neared the door, in stepped Calvin.

"What up, Conrad?" Donnelly asked.

"Calvin."

Paying no heed to Calvin's correction, Donnelly marched through the door. Calvin watched him disappear, then waved at May while approaching Carrie.

"Another big lunch date today?" Carrie asked once Calvin made his way to the front of the line.

"Angelina Jolie was busy."

"Probably with Brad Pitt, which explains why he's not here with me. Sure you're with Gadzooks?"

"Why?"

"You don't seem like the rest of them."

"Is that good or bad?"

"A place that has pools about who gets into my pants?"

"You know about that?"

"Think discretion's prized anywhere near as much as ambition?" she asked. "So tell me, is your visit here about chatter, or is there maybe a chance you're hungry?"

"And if I say both?"

"I'll take that as corny but flattering," Carrie said. "But I'll also have to start charging you if you don't order something. So tell me, by the minute or by the ounce?"

"So what's healthy but tasty?"

"Ma Po Tofu, which you can have with or without ground pork," Amy answered. "If, that is, you're feeling adventurous."

Ten minutes later, with a large bag of take-out food in hand, Calvin ambled into the small park where Alonzo was back shooting baskets.

"Hungry?" Calvin yelled as he approached.

"My girlfriend usually brings me lunch."

"Want to bet you don't have your cell phone?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"She called the office to say she couldn't make it."

Alonzo shrugged.

"Just so happens I'm a vegan," he said.

"Which is why I brought you a Chinese tofu dish that smells great."

"You're relentless," Alonzo said, shaking his head.

"You ain't seen nothin' yet."

Together the two of them strolled toward a picnic table, where Calvin took out the food, then napkins and chopsticks.

"Don't go thinkin' this makes us friends," Alonzo said as he took a seat.

"I wouldn't dare."

"And if I tell you you're full of shit?"

"You wouldn't be the first."

Alonzo gazed at Calvin for what felt like an eternity.

"What makes you think the two of us got something in common?" he finally asked.

"Over at Gadzooks –"

"Yeah?"

"Seems to me we're both outsiders," Calvin stated.

Instead of agreeing or disagreeing, Alonzo simply dug into the food.

With lunch ancient history, after walking a couple of blocks in silence while dribbling the basketball, Alonzo spoke as he and Calvin approached the Gadzooks building.

"So the other interns, they're treating you like shit?"

"Watch for a while, then you be the judge," Calvin replied as the two of them neared the main entrance.

Inside the main lobby, up from the garage came an elevator, which came to a stop. The door opened, revealing Jonathan Olson, who feigned disinterest at the sight of Calvin and Alonzo as they entered.

"Want to grab a beer after work?" Calvin asked Jonathan as the door closed and the three of them started their ascent.

"I'm not available for that," Jonathan answered condescendingly, drawing what seemed to him to be a perplexing chortle from Alonzo.

Reaching the eighth floor, the elevator door opened again, then out stepped a still somewhat confused Jonathan.

Calvin and Alonzo watched him head down the hallway before emerging.

"Lunch again on Monday?" Calvin asked.

"You know," Alonzo replied, "I may just be available for that."

No longer feeling quite so totally alone, Calvin smiled.

"Thanks, Alonzo."

"My friends call me 'Zo," Alonzo replied, patting Calvin on the shoulder.

Whatever glow Calvin temporarily felt after his time with Alonzo had long since dissipated by that evening, which found him, after another taco dinner, very much by his lonesome in a place he'd come to think of as Motel Hell.

Worse, he had a whole weekend ahead, with no plans, no kinships, and no expectations.

Back home on a Friday night, even one in which he found himself without a date, several choices would have been available. He could go out for pizza or a movie with some buddies. Or play 9-ball at the nearby pool hall. Or watch sports on the multiple TVs at his favorite dive bar while nursing a beer or two.

And on Saturday, he could get into a pick-up basketball game at either the outdoor court at Warinanco Park or the indoor court at the Y, depending on the weather. Or, on a nice day, find a softball game or go for a run.

The truth was that the allure owed less to any given activity than to the simple fact of companionship. The best example of that, Calvin always felt, was a karaoke bar. To be in a place where everyone was having fun thanks to "Feelings" or "Piano Man" would be an absolute nightmare if alone. But to be in such a place with a friend, or even better a date, would allow for the kind of laughs that would make the experience fun.

Not that Calvin wanted to romanticize a world from which he had long hoped to escape. Since the time he was a kid he had witnessed what happened to high school heroes whose luster faded more and more with every year that passed. Guys he had looked up to, who at one point had seemed almost larger than life, became sad fixtures at the annual Thanksgiving Day high school football game or at the yearly County basketball tournament, beaten down by dead-end

jobs that became a life sentence – if, that is, they weren't at some point laid off.

That's what prompted Calvin to apply for the internship at Gadzooks. And it's what made him want to persist despite the grim and unexpected reality he encountered there.

Unhappy, Calvin flirted with the notion of hitting a bar so as to try one of the Mexican beers he'd heard so much about. But given that the neighborhood was dangerous, and that his available funds were limited, instead he wracked his brain in search of ways to improve what seemed like a stacked deck at Gadzooks.

Unable to come up with suitable answers, Calvin finally climbed into bed. He tossed and turned for what felt like an eternity, then shifted his concentration into another round of list-making.

His first impulse was to focus on the ten best sexual relationships of his life. But that ended quickly when it became clear that even including mediocre experiences, he might still fall short of double digits. So instead Calvin started thinking of books that mattered.

His knee jerk reaction was to think in terms of all-time favorites. But then he reconsidered and decided to include only novels that he'd read since his college days were over.

Jennifer Egan's "A Visit From The Goon Squad" came immediately to mind. So, too, did Junot Diaz's "The Brief Wondrous Life Of Oscar Wao." Then there was the baseball novel that was about far more than baseball, "The Art Of Fielding" by Chad something-or-other whose last name he could never remember. And a couple of great collections of short stories: "Birds Of America," by Lorrie Moore, and "Bad Behavior" by Mary Gaitskill. The list would contain nothing by David Foster Wallace, Calvin decided, since his work, though interesting, never quite hit a responsive chord. And while he was sorely tempted to include Art Spiegelman's "Maus," he refused to nominate "Ender's Game" because of what he considered to be the author's abominable politics. Or Raymond Carver, though the reason for his exclusion might be somewhat unfair, since it was largely a reflection on all those who mimicked the signature style,

whether consciously or otherwise. As for John Irving, Calvin often referred to himself as the President of the Garp Resistance League. But though he was lukewarm at best about the Pynchon novels that followed "Gravity's Rainbow," he considered it, like Nabokov's "Lolita," not merely great, but also hysterically funny.

And then Calvin finally drifted off into slumber.

A few hours of fitful sleep, unfortunately, did not make for a joyful Saturday morning. In the hope of fighting his ever-mounting frustration, Calvin went on the internet in search of a picturesque place to run, then put on his gear and drove to Griffith Park.

Jogging in a rustic setting rather than on city streets had a positive effect on both his body and his mind, so after a shower he again turned to Google in search of a place to eat lunch.

The best solution regarding budget, abundance, and adventure seemed to be an Ethiopian restaurant with an all-you-can-eat buffet, which proved to be a pleasant surprise in more ways than one. Even though he pondered playfully if one of the dishes was fried missionary, the food was new to him, and tasty in an exotic way. Plus, instead of feeling geeky eating alone, Calvin found himself surrounded not just by couples and/or families, but also by solitary eaters, some with newspapers, magazines, or iPads, others simply using their fingers to wolf mounds of chicken, lentils, and strange greens thanks to a spongy, crepe-like bread called injera.

What Calvin had often termed postprandial narcosis, especially in the aftermath of a 3 ½ mile run, led to a nap, which took care of much of the afternoon. But then, inevitably, came the night.

Not wanting to give up without some semblance of a fight, Calvin started fiddling with his iPad. His search was for places to go where he would not feel even more alone – like at a Starbucks, for instance, or at a bar where he was certain to know no one – but where he would not necessarily be called upon to spend more of his rapidly dwindling supply of cash. Then to

his surprise, his cell phone rang.

Instantly recognizing the called ID, he answered the same way he'd done many times before.

"Aren't I a lucky guy?" he asked sarcastically.

"Bet your sweet ass!" said his childhood friend Plotkin via Bluetooth as, together with another member of what until recently had been the *three amigos* of a working class neighborhood in New Jersey, he cruised down the Broad Street of their youth in his ratty old Volvo station wagon.

"So when are you coming back to where you belong?" asked the other guy, Ralphie, who as always was stoned out of his gourd.

"And where exactly do I belong?"

"The garden spot of the Garden State," said Plotkin, who was proudly wearing an aging La Bamba & The Hubcaps t-shirt.

"Better known as Dreamland," added Ralphie.

"Dreamland, my ass!"

"C'mon," said Plotkin. "Admit that you miss us."

"Driving around in search of girls who somehow never materialize? Oh, I miss all of it, all right. About as much as I miss winter, and root canal work, and maybe ingrown toenails."

"So, Mr. Hollywood Hotshot, what's your plan for this big-time night in the city of the great, the near-great, and the never-will-be-great?" Ralphie asked.

"I'm torn between the Playboy Mansion, a night out with the Clippers, or maybe hanging with some starlets."

"Betcha that means hiding out in some dump," Plotkin teased, "making the scene with a magazine."

At the sound of some shots fired in the alley behind his motel room, which promptly set

off an array of other noises – people screaming, dogs barking, then approaching police sirens – Calvin couldn't help but gaze at his grim and depressing environment.

"I really appreciate your call, guys."

"Any time, homes," Ralphie replied.

"Yeah, any time," Plotkin added. "And please don't forget to give our love to all the women out there – if, that is, you ever manage to meet any."

With the two other Jerseyites laughing, Calvin hung up.

A long way from the Playboy Mansion, or any other sensuous or serious scene, a singularly lonely guy who feared the expense he would likely incur amidst the irresistible used vinyl and CDs at Amoeba Records drove his clunker instead into the Los Feliz area. Then, after a couple of unsuccessful rounds of the heavily trafficked area, Calvin almost miraculously managed to score a parking space.

Into one of the last remaining independent bookstores he stepped, hoping that an hour or so spent browsing would assuage some of his loneliness. But to his dismay, everyone in sight seemed to have some sort of companionship, whether in the form of a significant other or at least a friend or two.

Feeling even more geeky than before, Calvin wandered here and there through the store, occasionally glancing at a novel, a travel book, or a memoir.

But as he approached a section marked *Recent Releases*, he saw a well-dressed guy nearing thirty and sporting a fashionable stubble forcefully take a book from the hands of a woman whose back was toward Calvin.

"What gives you the right to tell me what's good and what's not?" Calvin heard the guy ask far too aggressively.

"You're just jealous," was the woman's retort.

"Of what?"

"That one of us can read without her lips moving – and knows that Thomas Pynchon is a novelist, not a pimp or a coke dealer."

His attention having been firmly secured, Calvin listened even more intently as the intensity increased.

"Which one of us has directed films that have grossed over \$500 million?" screamed the overly aggressive guy who clearly thought of himself as a hotshot.

"Well, go direct another, because I'm out of here."

The woman made an attempt to leave, but was grabbed around the wrist by the director.

"Says who?" he demanded.

"Says me," answered the woman.

"And me," added Calvin, stepping forward chivalrously.

Seeing red, the hotshot turned on Calvin.

"And who the fuck are you?" he bellowed.

"Just somebody telling you to cool it."

Unaware that taking boxing lessons had become quite the hip thing to do among movie biz up-and-comers, Calvin was unprepared when a roundhouse right, tutored by a trainer at Freddie Roach's Wild Card Gym, nailed him on the chin.

As Calvin started to go down, the hotshot pulled a couple of hundred dollar bills out of his wallet, then tossed them at him.

"Fuck you!" he hollered.

Taking a quick moment to cherish the sight of his KO, the director then stormed off, while the woman bent down to help her fallen would-be rescuer.

"You okay?" she asked

Only at that moment did Calvin realize that instead of some random female, it was a very

recognizable woman to whose rescue he had tried to come.

"Either you're J-Jasmine S-Simms," Calvin muttered as he stared at someone whom he had ogled in far too many teen movies while growing up. "Or he hit me harder than I thought."

"And you just did something very silly but brave," Jasmine replied as she helped him to his feet. "Let's go get you some ice."

Still having trouble believing his eyes, Calvin found himself even more dazed when Jasmine gave him an appreciative hug plus a kiss on his cheek – a moment that was captured thanks to several bookstore patrons who had pulled out their iPhones and Androids. Then she led him past a magazine rack where several publications featured cover photos of her.

With an aching jaw compounding all his other problems, another bout of sleeplessness was far from shocking for Calvin, who tossed and turned for a while. Then, after thinking about Jasmine's acting career, he began to compile yet another mental list.

Rather than ruminating about the teen pics that brought Jasmine fame, it was his top ten favorite films that Calvin tried to choose, all the while fully aware that his potential selections separated him even farther from almost all of his contemporaries.

There was not a single chapter of "Star Wars" that was a contender for his personal pantheon. Nor would there be any evidence of Spielberg, including "E.T." Or of John Hughes, whose antiquated (and exclusively white) depictions of teens were as close to Calvin's experiences as life on Pluto or Mars.

He also had reservations about films considered by many critics as pieties: "Lawrence Of Arabia," "The Searchers," Hitchcock's body of work other than "Psycho," and far too much of Chaplin.

To Calvin, American classics were films like Howard Hawks' "His Girl Friday," Billy Wilder's "The Apartment," Robert Rossen's "The Hustler," and Preston Sturges' "The Lady

Eve." Plus, of course, "Casablanca" and almost everything ever made by Buster Keaton.

Then there were possibilities that would give some the ammunition to dismiss him as a culture-vulture or an elitist: "Children Of Paradise," Godard's "Pierrot Le Fou," Resnais' "La Guerre Est Finie," and his favorite 21st century project, the Italian miniseries called "The Best Of Youth." But there was also a taste for what others would consider ridiculously lowbrow: young John Cusack in "Better Off Dead," Joseph Gordon-Levitt in "The Lookout," and an unsung period piece called "Heaven Help Us" set in a Catholic boys high school in Brooklyn.

Even as he finally grew sleepy, Calvin wrestled with other choices as well. Claude Sautet's "Mado" was special to him, and so was Louis Malle's "The Fire Within." Then there were Kurosawa's samurai films, plus Sergio Leone's stupendous "Once Upon A Time In America."

It was while thinking that only Leone could make scenery-chewers like James Woods, Elizabeth McGovern, Bert Young, Treat Williams, and a sometimes somnambulist like Robert DeNiro look like the greatest actors on earth that Calvin finally managed to make the transition into dreamland.

But with his jaw hurting, Sunday was far from a stellar day, with only another trip to the Ethiopian buffet providing any respite from the sense of being alone.

Nor did the night prove to be the slightest bit better.