

From Bret Easton Ellis, *The Rules of Attraction*. New York: Vintage, 1987.

PAUL Richard arrives sometime around eight. I'm sitting in the "boys'" room, in some plush chair, already dressed in this gray suit and silk red tie I bought at Bigsby and Kruthers, watching MTV, smoking, thinking about Sean. My mother and Mrs. Jared are in the other room getting dressed for dinner. Richard opens the door, wearing a tuxedo and sunglasses, hair greased back, walks in, lets the door slam and shouts, "Hi ya, Paul!"

I stare at Richard only slightly shocked. His long blond hair is now short, cropped and dyed a bright platinum blond that, because of the rain or mousse, looks dark. He's wearing a ripped white tuxedo shirt, one black sock, one white sock, and black Converse Hi-Tops, and a long overcoat with a Siouxsie and the Banshees decal stuck on the back. A tiny diamond stud earring in the left ear, the Wayfarers still on, black and shiny. He's only carrying one small black bag with Dead Kennedys and Bronski Beat stickers on it, and in the

[255]

other hand a very large cassette player and a bottle of Jack Daniel's, almost empty. He staggers in, then leans against the doorway, catching his balance.

"Richard," I say. I'm starting to feel that my entire world is beginning to turn into an issue of *Vanity Fair*.

"When are we gonna eat?" he asks.

"Richard? Is that you?" his mother calls from the other room.

"Yeah. It is," he says. "And my name's not Richard."

My mother and Mrs. Jared walk into the room, both in the middle of getting dressed and they stare at Richard who looks like a total Sarah Lawrence asshole but, maybe, sexy.

"It's Dick," he says lewdly and then, "Like, when's dinner?" He takes a deep swig from the Jack Daniel's bottle then belches.

[256]

PAUL The four of us—me, Richard, Mrs. Jared, my mother—are sitting in the middle of the dining room at The Ritz-Carlton. Classical music is being played by an expert pianist. Waiters dressed in new expensive tuxedos move quickly, gracefully, from table to table. Elderly women with too much make-up on,

slumped lazily, drunkenly in the red velvet chairs, stare and smile. We're surrounded by what Mrs. Jared likes to call, "old, very old money," as if the Jared's money was new, very new. (Yeah, those banks have been in the family for only about a century and a half, I refrain from saying.) The whole thing is just really unnerving, especially since Richard, even after a shower and a new suit, hair still greased back, sunglasses still on, as of yet, hasn't sobered up. He looks, unfortunately, pretty hot. He sits across from me, making lewd gestures that I pray neither mother will notice. His foot is now in my crotch but I'm too nervous to get hard. He's drinking champagne Kirs and he's downed about four, all of

[263]

them carefully and with what looks to me a definite sense of purpose. He'll alternately stare at his glass or raise his eyebrows up suggestively at me, then dig his shoeless foot into my crotch and I'll squirm and make faces and my mother will ask if I'm okay and I'll just cough, "Ahem." Richard stares at the ceiling, then starts humming some U2 song to himself. It's so quiet in this elegant, tacky, big cave that I'm afraid people are staring at us and, if not us, then at least at Richard, and they probably are and there's nothing to do but just get drunker.

After Mrs. Jared asks Richard for the sixteenth time to take his sunglasses off and he refuses, she finally uses the reverse psychology bit and says, "So Richard, tell us about school."

Richard looks at her and reaches into his pocket pulling out a Marlboro and grabbing the candle from the middle of the table, lights it.

"Oh, don't smoke," Mrs. Jared says disapprovingly, as he places the candle back.

I've refrained all evening from smoking and am seriously dying of a violent nicotine attack and I eye Richard's cigarette hungrily. I am trying to rip my napkin in half.

[264]

"My name's not Richard," Richard reminds her, quietly.

Mrs. Jared looks at my mother and then at Richard and asks, "Then, what is it?"

"Dick," he says, making it sound like the filthiest name imaginable.

"What?" Mrs. Jared asks.

"Dick. You heard me." Richard takes a long drag from the Marlboro and blows it across the table at me. I cough and sip my drink.

"No. Your name is Richard," Mrs. Jared corrects.

“Sorry,” Richard shakes his head. “It’s Dick.”

Mrs. Jared pauses. She’s slipping. She has not eaten much and has been drinking steadily, even before dinner began, and now she calmly asks, “Well, Dick ... how *is* school?”

“Sucks cock,” Richard says.

I’m sipping champagne when he says this and burst out laughing, spraying my plate. I quickly place the napkin I’m trying to rip apart over my mouth, attempt to swallow but start coughing instead, then choking. My eyes water and I breathe in, gasping.

“What are you taking ... Dick?” Mrs. Jared asks,

[265]

looking at me, trying to hold her composure, a stare of reprimand fixed on her face. I wipe my mouth and shrug.

“I don’t know. Gangbanging 111. Freebasing tutorial,” Richard shrugs, laughing, digging his foot even harder against my crotch. I cough again and grab at his foot beneath the table. “You like that?” he asks.

“What else?” Mrs. Jared is clearly trying not to act nonplussed, but her hand trembles as she finishes the rest of her drink.

“Oral Sex Workshop,” Richard says.

“My God,” my mother whispers, and she hasn’t said a word all night.

“What’s that like?” Mrs. Jared asks, still calm. Reverse psychology not working.

“I got a joke,” Richard says, still rubbing his foot against me, puffing on the cigarette. “You all wanna hear it?”

“No,” my mother and Mrs. Jared say at the same time.

“Paul wants to,” he says. “See, Julio Iglesias and Diana Ross meet at this party and they go back to Julio’s place and they fuck—”

[266]

“I do not want to hear this,” Mrs. Jared says, waving a passing waiter away after pointing at her empty glass.

“Neither do I,” my mother speaks again.

“Anyway, they fuck,” Richard continues, “and afterwards, Diana Ross, who’s come about fifty times and wants more of Julio’s dick, says—”

“I don’t want to hear this either,” my mother repeats.

“She says,” Richard goes on, getting louder, ““Julio you gotta fuck my pussy again, I loved it so much’ and Julio says ‘Okay baby, but I need to sleep for a leetle beet—””

“What has happened to you?” Mrs. Jared asks.

““But, you must keep one hand on my cock and the other on my balls’ Julio says, ‘and then after thirty minutes we fuck again, okay?’” Richard is getting animated and I’m just dying, tearing at the napkin.

“Oh my God,” my mother says, disgusted.

“And Diana says,” and now Richard does a really bad Diana Ross impersonation, ““Why do I have to keep one hand on your cock and another on your balls, Julio?””

“What has happened to you?” Mrs. Jared asks, interrupting again.

Richard’s getting pissed off that she’s interrupting

[267]

and his voice gets louder and I just slump down deeper into the chair, let go of the napkin and light a cigarette. Why not.

“And Julio says, ‘You wanna know why you have to keep one hand on my cock and one hand on my balls?’” He says this with a fierce leer on his face.

“What has happened to you?” Mrs. Jared is shaking her head and I feel sorry for her, sitting in this dining room, being abused by her son, dressed in that ugly outfit she probably got at Loehmann’s.

Richard gets even angrier that she’s interrupting his joke and I know what’s coming and I don’t even care who Sean is fucking tonight, at this moment. I just want the punchline to be over with, and Richard, the asshole, delivers it loud, staring at his mother: ““Because the last time I fucked a nigger she stole my wallet.”” And then he sits back, drained, but satisfied. The table becomes hushed. I look around the room and smile and nod at one of the old ladies at the table across from ours. She nods approvingly and smiles back.

“What has happened to you?” Mrs. Jared asks for the fourth time.

“What do you mean, *what has happened to me?* What do you think?” Richard asks, followed by a gruff snort

[268]

of contempt.

“I can see what that school has done to you,” she says.

Great, I’m thinking. It’s taken her three years to find this out? Actually Richard was always a rude jerk. I don’t understand what the big surprise is now. I look down at my lap as the foot disappears. I finish my drink and suck on an ice cube, leaving the cigarette burning, unsmoked in the ashtray.

“That’s really too bad, huh?” Richard sneers.

“Obviously I can see we should never have sent you there,” Mrs. Jared says, and as much of an asshole as Richard’s being, she’s still a bitch.

“Obviously,” Richard says, mimicking her.

“Do you want to leave the table?” she asks him.

“Why?” Richard asks, his voice rising, getting more defensive.

“Will you please leave the table,” she says.

“No,” Richard says, getting hysterical. “I will not leave the table.”

“I am asking you to leave the table *now*,” Mrs. Jared says, her voice getting quieter but more intense.

My mother watches this exchange in silent horror.

[269]

“No no no,” Richard says, shaking his head. “I will not leave the table.”

“Leave the table.” Mrs. Jared is turning crimson with fury.

“Fuck you!” Richard screams.

The pianist stops playing and whatever quiet din of conversation there was in the dining room is killed. Richard pauses, then takes a last drag from his Marlboro, finishes his Kir, and gets up, bows and walks slowly out of the dining room, one of his feet shoeless. The maitre d’ and the head waiter rush over to our table and ask if anything is wrong; if perhaps we want the check.

“Everything is fine now,” Mrs. Jared says and actually musters a faint smile. “I’m really terribly sorry.”

“Are you sure?” The maitre d’ looks me over suspiciously as if I were Richard’s twin.

“Positive,” Mrs. Jared says. “My son is not feeling well. He has a lot of pressures ... you know, with ... with mid-terms coming up.”

Mid-terms at Sarah Lawrence? I look over at my mother, who's staring off into space.

[270]

The waiter and the maitre d' look at each other for a moment as if they're not quite sure how to proceed, and when they look back at Mrs. Jared she says, "I would like another vodka Collins. Eve, would you like anything?"

"Yes," my mother says, stunned, shaking her head slowly, still horrified by Richard's exit. I wonder if I'll sleep with him tonight. "I mean ... no," she says. "Well ... yes." My mother is still confused and looks at me—for what? Help?

"Get her another one." I shrug.

The maitre d' nods and walks away, conferring with the waiter. The pianist resumes playing, slowly, unsure. Some of the people who were staring finally look away. I notice when I look down at my lap that I have almost succeeded in ripping my napkin in two.

After a while my mother says, "I think I want the next car to be blue. A dark blue."

No one says anything until the drinks arrive.

"What do you think, Paul?" she asks.

I close my eyes and say, "Blue."

[272]

EVE Mimi had two more vodka Collins and when the three of us left the dining room and were taking the elevator upstairs, she fell against the elevator attendant and almost passed out. I walked her back to the room where she took a Valium and went to sleep. Paul went into the other room. I sat on the bed watching Eve sleep for quite some time before I decided to tell him. I went into his room. He had undressed already and was in bed, reading. Richard wasn't there. The television was on. He looked up when I opened the door. Was he angry? Had he not wanted to come to Boston? Had he not wanted to come and see me? I felt very old at that moment and sorry for myself. What I had to tell him couldn't be said in a hotel room and finally I spoke, "Why don't you get dressed?"

"Why?" he asked.

"I thought maybe we'd go downstairs for a drink," I suggested, casually.

“What for?” he asked.

[277]

“I want to talk to you about something,” I told him.

He looked panicked and asked, “Why not here?”

“Let’s go downstairs,” I told him and went to get my purse.

He put on a pair of jeans and a gray sweater and a ripped black tweed coat that I didn’t recognize, that I had not bought for him. He met me in the hall.

We went downstairs to the bar and the host came up to us and looked Paul over. “Yes, there are two of us,” I said.

“I’m afraid there’s a dress code,” the host smiled.

“Yes? ...” I waited.

“This young man is not following it,” the host said, still smiling.

“Where does it say there’s a dress code?” I asked.

The host glared, still smiling and then walked over to a white board and pointed to the bright blue lettering, first to, “No Jeans,” and then, “Tie Must Be Worn.” I was getting a headache and I felt very tired.

“Forget it, Mom,” Paul said. “We’ll go somewhere else.”

I said, “We are guests in this hotel.”

[278]

“Yes, I realize that,” the host explained, officiously I thought. “But this applies to everyone.”

I opened my purse.

“Would you like me to make reservations for later?” the host asked.

“My son is dressed fine,” I said, handing the host a twenty dollar bill. “Just sit us in the back,” I said wearily.

The host took the bill quickly and said, “Yes, there might be a table over in the corner, in the dark.”

“In the corner, in the dark,” I said.

He sat us down at a terribly small, dimly lit table in back, away from the large crowded bar, but I was too tired to complain and simply ordered two champagne Kirs. Paul tried to light a cigarette inconspicuously and all at once he looked so handsome sitting there, the light playing off his features, his hair blond and thick and

combed back, his face lean, the nose regal and thin, that I wanted to hug him, make contact of some kind, but “Darling, I wish you wouldn’t smoke” was all I could say.

“Mother, I’m sorry,” he said. “But I need a cigarette. Badly.”

[279]

I let it pass and the waiter brought the Kirs. I focused all my attention on the way the waiter quickly, nimbly opened each small bottle of Taittinger and poured them into the tall thin glasses. And how very beautiful it looked when the champagne slowly dissolved the reddish purple cassis on the bottom of each glass. Paul crossed his legs and tried to look at me once the waiter left.

“You know, your father and I first came here seventeen years ago for our fifth anniversary. It was in December and it was snowing and we would order these,” I told him quietly, holding the glass up, tasting it.

He sipped his drink and seemed to relax.

I couldn’t say anything for a long time. I finished what was in the glass and poured the rest of the champagne from the small green Taittinger bottle into it. I drank more, then asked about Richard.

“I wonder what happened to Richard tonight,” I said, straining for conversation.

“Mid-terms,” Paul said derisively, and then, “I don’t know.”

“Any ideas?” I asked.

“Walking?” he sighed. “I don’t know.”

[280]

“His mother says he has a new girlfriend,” I mentioned.

Paul got very hostile very suddenly and rolled his eyes up. “Mom, Richard’s bi.”

“Bi what?” I asked.

“Bi,” he said, lifting his hands as if to describe this condition. “You know. Bi.”

“Bilingual?” I asked, confused. I was tired and needed sleep.

“Bisexual,” he said and stared at his glass.

“Oh,” I said.

I liked my son very much. We were in a bar together and he was being polite and I wanted to hold his hand, but I breathed in and exhaled. It was too dark where we sat. I touched my hair and then looked at Paul. And for a very brief moment there it seemed as if I never had known this child. He sat there, his face placid, expressionless. My son—a cipher. How did it end up this way, I wondered.

“Your father and I are getting a divorce,” I said.

“Why?” Paul asked, after a while.

“Because...” I stalled. Then said, “We don’t love each other anymore.”

[281]

Paul did not say anything.

“Your father and I have been living apart since you left for school,” I told him.

“Where does he live now?” he asked.

“In the city.”

“Oh,” Paul said.

“Are you upset?” I asked. I thought I was going to cry but it passed.

Paul took another sip and uncrossed his legs. “Upset?” he asked. “No. I knew it was going to happen sooner or later.” He smiled as if he remembered something private and humorous and it made me sad, and all I could say was, “We’re signing the papers next Wednesday afternoon.” And then I wondered why I told him this, why I gave him this detail, this piece of information. I wondered where Paul was going to be next Wednesday afternoon. With that friend, Michael, at lunch? And I wanted badly to know what he did at school—if he was popular, if he went to parties, who he slept with even. I wondered if he was still seeing that girl from Cairo, was it? Or Connecticut? He had mentioned something about her at the beginning of the year. I was sorry I brought him to Boston for the weekend and made him sit through that dinner. And I

[282]

could have told him this in the hotel room. Being in the bar did not matter.

“What do you think?” I asked my son.

“Does it matter?” he said.

“No,” I said. “Not really.”

“Is this what you wanted to talk to me about?”

“Yes.” I finished the champagne. There was nothing left to do.

“Is there anything else?” he asked.

“Anything else?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said.

“I suppose not.”

“Okay.” He put the cigarette out and did not light another one.

[283]