



DARREN GREER

STILL LIFE WITH JUNE

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*For John, Gary, Bob, Paul, Jim and Francine.  
And for all the guys from Anchorage.  
Wherever you are.*

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

*This hope we have as an anchor of the soul,  
a hope both sure and steadfast.*

— Hebrews 6:19

*The masks are designed to give the  
impression of figures constructed by art,  
each one fixed forever in its own fundamental emotion;  
that is, remorse for the father,  
revenge for the stepdaughter, scorn for the son,  
sorrow for the mother.*

— Luigi Pirandello, stage directions in  
*Six Characters in Search of an Author*

*All Cretans are liars.*

— Epimenides

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

# The Sally Ann Cocaine Corral

And alien tears will fill for him  
Pity's long broken urn,  
For his mourners will be outcast men  
And outcasts always mourn.

— “THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL,” OSCAR WILDE  
(Inscribed on the author's grave in Père Lachaise Cemetery,  
Paris, France.)

## I

I live on Lime Street, in a low rent, one-bedroom flat above a Filipino grocery called the Blue Moon. I own a few sticks of shabby furniture supplied to me by the Salvation Army, a second-hand computer, and a half-pint female tabby cat I picked up from the Humane Society for twenty bucks and a promise that I would take care of her until she died. I also promised that it would be a natural death, I would not help it along a little. That people actually get cats from the Humane Society just to torture and kill them ought to be argument enough that the world is an unfit place to live. For cats especially. But I will forgo any tendency towards pessimistic existential philosophy and just try to keep the record straight.

## II

I'm losing my hair. Each morning I stand in front of the bathroom mirror with a wooden ruler and measure from the bridge of my nose to my hairline. It recedes about a quarter of an inch every six months. A Grade Twelve biology teacher once told me

that because baldness is passed on through the estrogen carrier, and because my mother's father was as bald as a baby, I would be totally bald by the time I was twenty-five. Twenty-five came and went, with no noticeable hair loss. I felt triumphant. Now I'm thirty and the teacher's prediction is coming true.

The bastard.

I figure by the time I'm forty I'll be bald as a hard-boiled egg.

I only hope that by then they'll have invented a pill that works, or I'll be rich enough to fly to Rome and have transplants.

I've decided that toupees, no matter how expensive, are out of the question.

I hate baldness, but I hate a pathetic and noticeable attempt to hide it more.

### III

The things I hate most are:

- 1) Middle East violence
- 2) Hospital food
- 3) Microsoft Word 6
- 4) My father.

### IV

I love dried apricots but I'm allergic to them. Sometimes I eat them anyway and vicious red welts rise on my arms and face like stigmata. Once I shaved off all my body hair, went out and bought a bag of dried apricots, ate them, then got undressed again and stood in front of the bathroom mirror to watch red welts rise in places I had never seen them before. The marks that rose along my arms and legs and chest and ass from eating all those apricots were so long and hard and crimson that it looked like someone had spent the afternoon working me over with a leather whip.

If you didn't know any better, you'd probably have thought I was heavily into s&m.

V

I'm not.

VI

Once I met this guy named Eric — a sweet, quiet, dark-haired doctor of linguistics who wrote his linguist friends long letters in Greek and Latin. Eric was older than I am now, but was still very young to be a doctor of anything. (This was all before I turned thirty, and I could still fool myself that someday I was going to be in a meaningful relationship or famous. After thirty, you mostly give up on the idea of a meaningful relationship.)

After a week of getting to know each other Eric invited me back to his apartment. I thought it was about time. I had never dated anyone for a week and *then* had sex. With me it was always the other way around. The apartment was arranged in a kind of casual slovenliness that only intellectuals and musicians can pull off without being called slob. Boxed in. Airless. Milk cartons with his favorite LPs piled everywhere in them and no TV.

The requisite ratty beige sofa.

Eric didn't believe in materialistic consumer culture and was a self-professed Luddite who would never buy a CD player. Bully for him.

We undressed in his living room. I've always been shy about undressing in front of other people, even ones I'm about to have sex with. I've always been more of a shut-out-the-lights-and-don't-look-at-me-until-I-come kind of guy. But Eric insisted. When I stood exposed in front of him he took me by the hand and led me into his bedroom. He threw me on the bed, leaned

over me without bothering to pull the curtains and, so quickly I had no time to protest, slapped my wrists into a pair of handcuffs he kept hidden somewhere. What was he going to do to me now? Recite me Sappho in the original or do something more Greek and less poetic?

For a moment I got scared. Eric was a quiet, intelligent, polite good-looking academic — just the sort of guy you'd read about in the morning paper as having a few spare human body parts tucked away in his refrigerator. But then I imagined Eric at twelve asking his parents for his first set of handcuffs so he could go camping with his friends.

I did the only thing a guy can do under those circumstances. I laughed.

Now, if you are into sadomasochism you know a slave can do anything — cry, scream, pull fruitlessly at his restraints, beg to be set free — and it will only serve to turn the master on and prolong the role-playing. He can do anything but laugh. Laughter makes the master blush and turn away, embarrassed, which is exactly what Eric did. This made me think of a twelve-year-old again and laugh even harder. Eric plucked the keys off a shelf somewhere above my head and freed me from the cuffs. I sat up, still smiling and rubbing my wrists. He perched on the edge of the bed and pulled on his underwear.

“Come on,” I said and tried to nuzzle him. “We don't need the handcuffs. We can still have fun.”

He pushed me away. “I think you'd better go.”

I got dressed while he walked around his bedroom, straightening things, pretending to look for something — he didn't say what — and making a point of ignoring me. When I tried to ask him what was wrong I saw that he was trying hard not to cry. I left him sitting on the edge of his bed without saying goodbye.

Sometimes it's better not to know.

## VII

Re: my cat.

Shortly after I got her, I found myself wishing what everyone who owns a pet and isn't entirely happy with the world wishes occasionally: that I could *be* her. Just for a day — to lie around my apartment and glory in my sloth, without having to wonder who I am or what my life is about. I wouldn't have to worry about God. Dogs may see their owners as gods of sorts, but don't fool yourself about cats. They see us as nothing more than elaborate feeding mechanisms and mobile heat radiators. Even if we were gods to them, what could be better than pissing on your higher power's Turkish carpet or digging your claws into his ass when he's lying naked in bed in the morning? My cat actually did that, and for weeks whenever I had sex with anyone they saw the scratches and asked me what happened.

"My cat doesn't believe in a divine order," I said.

## VIII

Speaking of scars, I have two that are permanent. One on my forehead from falling down and hitting my head on a rock when I was seven; another, like a tattoo, on my shoulder. Scars make me squeamish and I don't like to think about them or look at them for long. Despite the encroaching baldness, I manage to wear the front of my hair long, and I always wear long sleeves. End of story.

## IX

I hate Hollywood movies about gay men and women. Hollywood churns out gay movies like butter. A whole entertainment industry has sprung up around gay hatred, gay love, gay achievement, gay coming out, gay sports, gay bars, gay moms, gay dads, gay morality, gay conservatives. Some of them are even shown in

the big movie houses and straight people go to see them. In fact, you can't even cruise at these movies because almost everyone there is heterosexual. I stopped going years ago. In the new millennium, gay has become *cool*. I have not become *cool*, even though I own a cat. I hate the fact that gay is acceptable, because at least when it wasn't I had an excuse.

I'm still not acceptable, but now I have nowhere to put my hatred.

I can't hate homophobes anymore because there are so few of them. At least publicly, they are an endangered species. I could hate the Christian fundamentalist, I-hate-everything people like Jerry Falwell, but they are no fun. Everyone hates them in turn, and it's only their stupidity that keeps them from seeing they're fighting a losing battle. But you have to give them some credit. At least the I-hate-everything people have somewhere to put their hatred. With nothing left to hate anymore, the rest of us end up hating ourselves and our parents and leave it at that.

## X

My cat, Juxtaposition, doesn't hate herself. If you hate yourself, you don't spend two hours each day grooming with no chance of ever getting laid. And she doesn't even know her parents. She was one in a litter of five. I took her from the pound because she stood off from me and didn't participate in the kittenish antics of her brothers and sisters, climbing all over each other in the cage to lick my outstretched hand. I appreciate reserve in a cat, just as I appreciate it in a human being. Juxtaposition and I get along so well because we each possess two overriding characteristics that suit us for life in the big city: selfishness and suspicion. Yet even I wasn't prepared for the kind of cat she turned out to be. What was quiet and reserved in the pound was an absolute berserker out of it.

She slept quietly in the cat cage all the way home. I kept admiring her through the grilled door of the carrier. She was completely still as I walked, her little kitten head on her paws. What a joy, I thought. Then I got her home. I set the cage down in the hallway, opened it up and out she came. She balanced on three legs and licked one paw while she looked around.

When she made the decision I'm not sure.

I suspect that Juxta is smarter than other cats, or is as smart as all cats who mostly hide from dumb humans how intelligent they are.

She let loose. She started running. Not just loping, but whizzing back and forth through every room, over the bed, across the dresser, scattering cologne bottles and hair gel and canisters of talcum powder as she went. She kept this up for hours; her destructive rampage was breathtaking in its industry and pure methodology. She broke two hand-blown coloured-glass bowls from Ikea, emptied one bottle of cologne (Jovan Musk for Men) on the bedroom floor, and scratched the stuffing out of the arms on both my blue loveseats. She knocked over every article of hygiene — toothbrush, toothpaste, razor, shaving cream, and hand soap dispenser — from the sink in my pathetically tiny bathroom; it all fell into the bowl of the toilet I'd peed in that morning and forgotten to flush.

I ran after her trying to contain the damage but it was hopeless. She was a domesticated feline, faster than humans in an open space and infinitely more agile in a closed one. Eventually I struck on the bright idea of locking her in the bathroom where most of the damage that could be done already had been. I cat-proofed the apartment. Everything breakable went into a drawer. I covered the arms of the loveseats in a double layer of clean towels and bought a scratching post in the hopes (later to be dashed) that she would use it. Then, when everything had

been put away or thrown away and all the glass swept up, I cautiously opened the door to the bathroom.

I found her asleep on the bathmat. I had forgotten to set up the litter box and she had shit and pissed in one corner. The room smelled strongly of ammonia and cat crap, and my things were still soaking up urine in the toilet, but that was all. She woke when I entered, struggled to her feet, stretched lazily, and arched herself affectionately against my shins. She curled up all night with me on one loveseat and watched television. Occasionally she would go to the litter box in the bathroom, or to her food dish in the kitchen, but always she would return and settle against my thigh.

When I went to bed she went with me.

When I got up she got up.

When I went to the bathroom she went in her cat box across from me, and we stared at each other while we did our business.

For three days she was an elegant, well-behaved lady, and I began cautiously replacing the things I'd hidden. On the fourth day I came home from work and found the apartment in ruins. Every glass item was broken. The arms of the loveseats, from which I'd removed the towels, were shredded; they'd later be covered with masking tape in an attempt to keep the stuffing from bleeding out. And there she was, curled up on one ruined loveseat, looking at me as if to say, "What are you staring at? I'm a cat! What did you expect?"

I named her then, with a kind of desperate cleverness. I thought that I could relate this anecdote to visitors someday when they asked why I had masking tape all over my furniture. Yet I cried too, when I thought of how much this stuff would cost to replace. Turned out I would never have to replace any of it. She would never let me. Anything brought into the house immediately

bore Juxta's claw marks as a brand of ownership, so I stopped bringing in anything new.

Which gets me to thinking: maybe Juxta didn't claw me that morning, with my bare ass sticking out from underneath the covers, to say she was hungry. Maybe she was marking as hers the final thing in the apartment that remained unmarked. Maybe my cat was saying with those four, deep claw marks carved incisively into my soft-as-butter rear-end "Your ass is mine, oh great moving radiator." How can you not admire guts like that, even from a half-pint psychotic female cat?

I think everyone should have a little Juxtaposition in their lives.

## XI

December 25 I head out to the nearest gay bar and get wasted. I have made this something of a tradition. It doesn't matter which bar it is, as long as it's gay and it stays open. Miraculously, I never have any problems finding what I am looking for. Once I asked a man who had the bad luck to be tending bar on December 25 at The Stables, a gay country joint in the west end of the city, why he thought that was.

"Why I think what is?" He wore a red-with-white-stitching cowboy shirt, tight blue jeans, a wide brass belt buckle engraved with longhorns, and a white Stetson hat tipped far back on his head. He was leaning back against the beer fridge, his arms crossed, watching Country Music Television on the big-screen TV. The volume was off because the jukebox also was playing country music but with a different song, so that the lyrics being sung by the Nashville cowboys on one side of the bar didn't match the lyrics coming from the jukebox on the other. (This is normal, and not just for country bars. It is also normal for drag queens.

It always amazes me that drag queens will go to near Herculean efforts to fit themselves in a dress, shave and pad their chests, tape their cock and balls to the inside of their legs but rarely bother to learn the lyrics to the songs they're lip-syncing.)

I asked the bartender, who had paid no attention to me since pouring my drink, why gay bars stayed open on Christmas Day. "All the straight bars shut down," I observed.

He shrugged, a nonchalant I-don't-much-give-a-shit raising of the shoulders and expanding of the chest. A masculine shrug, but somehow you just knew if you took this guy home his legs would be over your shoulders before you could say *Yippee-I-A*. Still fixated on the out-of-sync videos he said, "Maybe we look after our own. Maybe we want our brothers to have a place to go and straight bars just don't give a crap."

"Maybe," I said. "But what about you? Why are you working here on a day like today?"

He looked at me. I had already downed four straight double whiskeys — the only thing you should drink in a country and western bar, gay or straight — and I was heavily buzzed. He said, "You really want to know?"

"Damn tootin'," I said, and smiled.

"My mother is shackled up with some artist down south and never calls," he said. "My father's a prick who won't talk to me because I'm a fag, and I don't like staying in my apartment because five years ago my lover died of AIDS. We didn't celebrate Christmas that year. I was too busy wiping his shit off the sheets. So I prefer to work."

He turned back to the TV screen. I didn't know what to say. I hadn't expected such an honest answer from him but, now that I had one, I couldn't let the moment go to waste. "Do you have it? AIDS, I mean?"

He shook his head. "Lucky, I guess. Do you?"

“No. Not the last time I checked anyway.”

“And when was that?”

“Last year.”

“Been fucked without a condom in the last year?”

“No. Haven’t fucked with one either.”

“You a top?” The cowboy’s stance suddenly changed. It was a shift I’d seen many times, especially on Christmas Day, when there aren’t many customers around and a bartender or waiter can open up a little. That certain way of relaxing the shoulders and the slight but perceptible turn of his body towards me and away from the television — the heartwarming, Christmasy moment when I change from a faceless, nameless customer into a sex object.

I knew from experience that if things had played out the way the bartender might have wanted them to, eventually — maybe after a few weeks or months of sleeping with him — there would be another change, another subtle shift in our relations. I’d change from sex object into a human being. That’s just about the time the bartender/cowboy would dump me. Or I’d dump him, depending on who glimpsed the other’s humanity first.

“No,” I said. “I’m not a top.”

“Too bad,” said the cowboy. “We could have had some fun.”

His attention wandered back to the television. I bolted the last of my whiskey and left him alone, moving on to the next bar, looking for God knows what and nearly always finding it.

## XII

That same evening I ran into Eric. I was surprised to see him. I pictured him as the type with family, friends, connections. Wrong. By the looks of it, Eric was as cut loose as the rest of us. Or maybe he just didn’t want to go home that year because of

the way he looked. His head was bandaged. He had two black eyes. The skin around one of them was swollen and had turned more colours than a Tequila Sunrise.

“I got beat up,” he said.

I wanted to ask if he had handcuffed the wrong guy, but stopped myself. That was not the kind of thing you blurted out in a gay bar, even on Christmas Day when the place was nearly empty. Eric seemed to see right through me. He wasn't a doctor of linguistics at twenty-seven for nothing. He was smart. Besides, even linguists, at some point in their lives, have to ignore the words and focus on the silences *between* the words, just like the rest of us.

“I got bashed,” he said. “They were waiting outside in the parking lot last weekend.”

“And you're back here tonight?”

Eric nodded. “Why wouldn't I be? Where else am I going to meet someone?” He looked me in the face so nakedly, so shamelessly, that it was my turn to be embarrassed.

This time I didn't laugh. This time I turned away.

For weeks afterwards I woke up in the middle of the night picturing Eric's bruised and damaged face, made all the more noticeable by the too-white bandage wrapped around his forehead. I wished that I hadn't laughed when he slapped on the cuffs. Being with someone and bound to the headboard is better than being alone — perfectly free in your bed with no one and nowhere to move to.

### XIII

The thing about cruising gay bars on Christmas Day is that your odds of scoring are both substantially reduced and substantially increased. Substantially reduced because, all things being equal, there are fewer people in a gay bar on Christmas

Day and therefore, from a probability standpoint, there are fewer people to pick up. Substantially increased because most of the people who are in gay bars on Christmas Day are so desperate for basic human contact they'd go home with a Doc Martin shoe if it made a move, and maybe even if it didn't.

Now I know what you're thinking. Basic Aristotelian logic:

- A) You could fire a cannon in a gay bar on Christmas Day and not worry about hitting anyone
- B) If you did hit someone it wouldn't matter much because he would probably be an all-time loser. Then,
- C) Yours truly is probably an all-time loser.

I'm not going to argue but let me answer this way:

- A) I already know I'm a loser
- B) A loser who knows he's a loser is slightly less of a loser than someone who doesn't know it, and,
- C) There's nothing worse than a loser who doesn't know he's a loser.

#### XIV

I haven't told you yet why I go to gay bars to get loaded on Christmas Day. I go to hear the stories. You haven't heard anything until you've gone to a gay bar on Christmas Day and heard the stories. Eric and the cowboy were nothing; interesting asides, not shocking at all. I have discovered that among those of us hanging out in bars on Christmas Day a lot of us get gay-bashed, a lot of fathers are pricks and many, many mothers are shackled up with artists down south. A lot of lovers have died of AIDS. Hell, a lot of us have AIDS, or live in shelters, or live nowhere at all, or used to do coke but ran out of money and

now just drink. Some of us have cerebral palsy, or are just drunk (between the very drunk and the very afflicted it's hard to tell the difference). Others have cancer or Hepatitis C, or are bipolar and take lithium, or suffer from Tourette's Syndrome and take dopamine injections. I have never met anyone with diabetes in the bars on Christmas Day.

This is a big city. Even our little ten percent of it is endlessly varied. A lot of people take a lot of things and have had a lot of things happen to them. That's why I go.

These stories keep me alive for the rest of the year. The other three hundred and sixty-four days I sit in my apartment on Lime Street and write the stories down, then sell them to magazines. I can even sell some of these stories to the more liberal straight magazines. After all, with all apologies to Jerry Falwell, cerebral palsy is cerebral palsy, no matter who gets it.

It's not that I am a singularly depressing writer, who writes only about death. I hear funny stories too, and moving, inspirational stories. I hear stories about gay men whose dads came out of the closet at sixty-five and start doing drag. I hear stories about lesbian musicians who turn out to be men à la *Victor Victoria*. Once I heard a story about a man who bought a house in the city and invited young hustlers to live there for free. He didn't even insist they sleep with him, though some of them did, of course. It was a disaster. They stole from him, used him, beat him up. But it was a happy story, because of the way he told it. He laughed and said he would do it again if he had the money and his house hadn't been repossessed. He even asked me if I wanted to live rent-free in his apartment with him. When I passed, he shrugged and said he was thinking of starting another commune, on a much more limited scale. This one for people who didn't have anywhere to go on Christmas Day.