

Kali Yuga

The first time I met my half brother I was seventeen and he was fourteen. I had organized my assignments for the trip and jacketed my textbooks in butcher paper, but when I arrived at the airport in Virginia and saw the hale blue-jeaned boy and his mother, as thin and erratic as the menthol 100 she soon lit up, I knew I should have left my schoolwork behind.

He caught me in a bear hug, his chin against my collar as if he were going to bite me. Not once that day did his mother address me directly. She spoke like a poet to the air, “Hot dogs on the table. Coke in the fridge.” The sky was haze and glare, humidity worse than the drizzle Vancouver’s writers so often elegize.

That evening, as he took me to meet two of his friends, he told me that his mother had named him after the guy who owned *Playboy* magazine. He announced that he planned to one-up his namesake, the way a six-year-old might, dumb and proud, pointing at his chest with his thumb.

We met his friends (two brothers with beards), and with them we wandered the lumpy terrain of an incipient subdivision, drank Busch (hidden suitably in the bushes), and visited an abandoned Ford Mustang whose tires and windows the duo had blasted with shotguns (the glass mixed with smashed Jack Daniel’s bottles, one black-and-white label stuck to a seat). I learned that the Mustang

belonged to a family whose many generations sounded as if they were composed of violent brothers, all of whom resided in a single house. Hugh and the beards had some sort of feud with them, and as a result of it, we later fled a red monster truck on lifters (Confederate flag and devil cab lights and hee-hawing passengers). Hugh was the least fearful, standing in the middle of the road as he watched the truck race toward him, his eyes as wide as tunnels. Then he turned, mooned it, and darted into the trees, hooting and monkey-like as he hitched up his jeans.

When he and I arrived back at his house, dawn was a faint, ugly elbow smear on the dark glass of his little town. I supposed I'd been treated as any visitor from afar, regaled by local tradition. I was three years older than Hugh, but next to him I felt young. I didn't understand how our father could have produced two entirely different creatures nor why the second looked so much more like him.

"I'm happy as shit to see you, Andy," Hugh said and hugged me like a wrestler grapples.

"It's Andrew," I corrected, not for the first time that night.

"If you say so," he told me. He then insisted that I sleep next to him, in his bed, his arm around me and his beer snores in my face.



The second time we saw each other was at my father's funeral, and it was, Hugh told me, his first trip out of Virginia. He was seventeen, close to graduating and wearing the shoulder-length hair and cropped beard of a country rock star. He'd flown to Vancouver for the death of a man he'd met twice and had paid his way with earnings from working construction, what his high school considered Life Credits and for which it let him out at noon.

"I can't believe it," he told me, hunched as if to confide. "We were gonna travel the country when I finished school. We talked about it."

I glanced away, afraid he'd see his stupidity in my eyes. My

father never followed through on his plans or promises. He could talk in a way to make anyone dream, on the rare occasion that he actually conceded to talking—usually after too many drinks. But he was always one novel revision away from having the time to do the things he'd promised. I'd learned this as a boy, though I said nothing to Hugh. I let him squeeze his tears and pay fealty to my mother's mourning, which came from the bitterness of years spent waiting to inherit my father's wealth. Hugh didn't know this, and she received his gesture, not hugging him but extending her hand for him to touch, like a pope with a ring to be kissed.

Afterward, I showed him my father's basement study, rank with BO and two decades of bourbon fumes, cramped with a heaped *escritoire* and walls of sagging, overflowing bookshelves, the single high window heavily draped. At the center of it all squatted the reading chair whose synthetic nap had been worn to a glassy sheen, its right arm flecked with the burn marks of fallen cigarette embers. I couldn't bring myself to say that my father had had about as much impact on my life as a boarder would have. Instead, I described the three novels he'd published about being a draft dodger, doing my best to make him sound heroic.

"Did he talk about me much?" Hugh asked.

I cleared my throat. The air was thick and musty down there, and I had to clear my throat again. He knew nothing about our father and had no right to care. He stooped, as if the ceiling were too low, and held one arm across his chest, like a spent boxer waiting for the final punch.

"He told me you were like him," I said, lowering my eyes. In front of the chair was a greasy-looking patch of carpet where my father's feet had rested. When he'd told me I had a half brother, I'd asked him how he could be sure Hugh was really his. "The boy's my spitting image," he'd said and then, when he saw my face, added, "Consider yourself lucky."

“Did he leave me anything?” Hugh asked.

“This was his,” I told him. A leather jacket lay on the desk, so new it smelled of the tannery. My father had bought it a week ago, the cut immodestly fashionable, unlike anything he’d ever worn. It was the sort of jacket a poorly aging man might go for.

Hugh clutched it, bunching up his shoulders and inhaling. He stared at the shelves, and the way he looked at them made me look too, at the crooked and piled-up spines in the faint, almost particulate light, each book thick with use and broken-backed.

“Maybe,” he said, “maybe someday I could be a writer too.”

I scrunched up my cheeks as if I might agree.

That evening, I introduced Hugh to Nathalie, a love interest, my relationship with her having stalled during a month of platonic outings only to bloom suddenly in the warm climate of my father’s death, after a night when I broke down and cried. She brushed aside my discomfort with Hugh’s redneck bearing, telling me I should be proud that he looked up to me. We took him to Gastown, the Spaghetti Factory, and the comedy club, where he ignored the jokes and repeatedly asked Nathalie questions.

“So you studied computers?”

“I did my degree in programming.”

“That’s not building them, is it?”

“No, it’s putting the information in. If a computer were a robot, I’d be giving it its personality.”

“You know how to do that?”

“Actually, I did my undergraduate thesis in artificial intelligence, but no, I couldn’t program robotic AI without a team.”

The comic was talking about staying with his fiancée’s parents and a toilet with no water in it—the sound the handle made when he hit it repeatedly—and I focused my surprise toward the stage,

since I'd had no idea she was interested in artificial intelligence. I knew she'd come to the University of British Columbia from MIT to do graduate work in a lab developing internet gateways. She was telling Hugh about that now, and he kept saying, "I don't get it." So she spoke in his currency—*Tron: Deadly Discs* and *The Terminator*—and he nodded vigorously at her explanations of computers wiring the world together.

"If your nervous system were the internet, this would be Virginia," she told him and pinched one fingertip of his big hand where it lay limp on the table, abandoned by his overworked brain. "And this would be Vancouver," she added, tweaking his earlobe. For the first time that day, he laughed, guffawing like an idiot. The comedian perked up, thinking he finally had an audience, but Hugh was staring at her, his eyes big and still—one-stop, one-size-fits-all sensory organs, doing the hearing and feeling, maybe even the thinking too.

A few nights after Hugh's return home, the phone rang. Nathalie answered.

"It's Hugh," she told me, holding the mouthpiece to her patterned pajama breast.

I fumbled the receiver to my ear.

"Hugh," I said. "What is it?"

"I'm all fucked up, Andy. I'm all fucked up."

"Where are you?" I asked, as if he weren't three thousand miles away. He must have punched the phone because the earpiece pulsed with a hard thump, and touch tones squealed.

"Go to bed," I told him.

"Aw, fuck you," he said and hung up.

Nathalie was watching me.

"Well, tarnation," I told her, "that boy's done gone off the deep end."

"He doesn't talk like that," she said.

She pushed her hair back along her jaw and looked away, reaching to turn off the light.

Nathalie must have made an impression: the next time I heard from Hugh was a few weeks later via the internet. He began writing frequent emails, and in them, he didn't sound half so rustic, as if a computer transistor filtered out his roughness. He confessed that emails made him realize how bad his spoken English was—I mean, *how do you write "a whole 'nother" and not sound stupid?* He said he'd been reading Steinbeck and Thoreau, had tried *Moby-Dick* but was working on the earlier stuff, *building my reading muscles for the big one*. He mentioned no longer doing construction since he'd received his *share of the inheritance*. I stared at the email a long time, not sure why I was surprised that he'd received anything at all.

As I got busier over the months that followed his visit, I answered Hugh's emails less frequently. To his sprawling messages, I shot back replies that were basically apologies for not writing more. I finished my undergraduate degree early and launched into a master's in comp lit, convinced I could finish within a year if I did my coursework and thesis simultaneously. All the while, I began to sense Nathalie becoming unfamiliar. We maintained our rituals of meals, movies, and occasional intercourse, but sometimes, when I looked up from my desk, I no longer recognized her. She was the only woman I'd slept with, six years older and so pale her mousy hair appeared shimmering and dark against her skin. She almost matched my height but was fine boned, her wrists like sticks and her extra weight conspicuous given the slightness of her frame. She appeared a well-fed waif and not the child of a Boston Brahmin financier and a Parisian mother.

After first meeting Nathalie, I questioned her willingness to date an undergraduate, and she said that age and maturity didn't necessarily coincide, and that, anyway, I was something of an old man.

"Not quite as sexy as an old soul," I told her.

“No,” she agreed. “Anyway, you really like me.”

As I embroiled myself in my thesis (“Silence and the Politics of the Dispossessed: Historicizing Dickens”) and subsisted on Chef Boyardee, peel-top ravioli, she took up kickboxing and burned off the last of what she called her baby fat. She tried to convince me to come to class with her, but I let my organizational tendencies get the best of me. I can still see myself gesturing vaguely as I explained to her that I wanted to finish academics, make the transition to the job world, and then get involved with hobbies and sports, but not do everything at once.

The evening before my thesis was due, Nathalie and I were coming back from the bus stop, taking turns with the cage of the hamster she’d inherited from a friend who’d gone off to Bolivia. The poor little thing was crouched, watching its wheel spin with a ghostly motion from the momentum of Nathalie’s strides. We came around the corner and saw Hugh sitting on the bottom step of our porch.

“Jesus,” I said, and before my eyes flashed the thesis pages my professors would scribble with incredulous red. He was already up and belted me with one of his regional hugs so popular in the World Wrestling Federation. He handled Nathalie more gingerly, as if she were pregnant, though he was just trying to get his arms around the cage.

His hair was collar length and casually mussed, no longer a mullet. He looked more textured, more natural, and less purely redneck, though I couldn’t yet identify what had changed over the last—I tried to calculate the time—year and a half?

He smiled as if he might yodel and said, “It’s just so good to see the two of you!” His constrained voice called to mind a 1950s housewife exclaiming *Isn’t that swell!* I considered that this discord might be the result of his inner redneck going head-to-head with his budding computer geek slash bookworm slash bohemian.

As I invited him inside, I asked him about the knit friendship

bracelet on his big, suntanned wrist and the copy of *The Sun Also Rises* in his knapsack pocket.

“I mean,” I said, “how do those go over with the beards back home?”

He shrugged. “It’s just stuff I got on the road.”

Thence began the narrative that would last until after midnight, his way of speaking fluctuating, like a car radio caught between stations. His hillbilly rhythms verged upon taut, overdescriptive, even pedantic phrasing that caused him to slow, as a truck might, coming upon deep potholes. “An e-gre-gious wrong turn,” he said at one point and blinked, as if reassuring himself.

All the same, he told his story with relish, conveying that he was doing the right thing, seeing the world in the footsteps of Kerouac and Miller and a few others I hadn’t read.

“I’ve been as far south as the Panama Canal, and as far north as Kuujuarapik, Québec, on the Hudson Bay. I haven’t been to Alaska yet, but I figure I’ll head up thataway after this little *detour*.” He elbowed me.

Two pages of red ink, take one down, pass it around. My thesis concerns had become a song one sings driving long distances.

Hugh went on to describe states he’d crossed, people he’d met, communes lived on, meals shared. It sounded like a coming-of-age set in the 1960s, clichéd in all its short-lived glory.

“What’s the Arctic like?” Nathalie asked.

“In northern Québec, you’re so close to the pole the earth is curved, like you’re standing on a hill wherever you go. Sometimes there’s a clear three hundred and sixty degrees of horizon and thick moss all over the ground. It’s like walking on a mattress. The rock shows through the moss here and there, and most of the stones have been rubbed and rounded by the glaciers. I spent a month on an island in James Bay, just beneath the Hudson Bay. I was living with this girl, Mélanie Boudreau from Montréal. She was up there studying bird migrations. She was all alone, and when she saw me

in a canoe, she waved me over. She had black, black hair and the greenest eyes. Man, it was like something from *The Odyssey*. I got out of the canoe, and she asked me a bunch of questions in pretty bad English and then told me I should stay with her. So I did. I guess she thought God had sent her a man, except she was the most hardcore atheist I've ever met. We were like Adam and Eve on the northern edge of the earth. The coldest water ever. The sun was so bright and the air—it was thin and cool. Night hardly lasted an hour. And, man, those French girls, they really know what they want.”

He laughed and then suddenly turned red, no doubt remembering that Nathalie was half-French.

“Oh, yes we do,” she said and reached out and squeezed his meaty forearm.

“You know,” I said and feigned a stretch, “it’s already eleven. My thesis is due tomorrow.”

“Hey. I’m sorry, bro. I shouldn’t be distracting you.”

The cage was on the table, the hamster racing in its wheel, and Hugh considered it. None of us spoke as Hugh’s gaze got vague and unfocused and he finally said, “I took Dad’s last name.”

“Maybe you’ll be the first Estrada to make it to the Playboy Mansion,” I told him.

He guffawed and slapped the table, as if nothing on earth could bother him. But what would my father have thought of his last name and hard-won idealism coupled with a reference to the king of smut? In truth, I didn’t really know.

“Did you ever tell Nathalie how your mother chose your name?” I asked him.

“No,” he said and grinned. “She saw a TV show about how Hugh Hefner lived and decided that if she had a son, he should be smart enough to get the women and live the good life and take what he wanted. Growing up, I always told myself I’d do a hundred times better.”

“That’s kind of sweet,” Nathalie said. “She must really love you.”

It occurred to me that they both had Teflon brains, that nothing could upset them.

“You know,” Hugh said, “I’m a dual citizen now.”

He fished two passports out of his knapsack. He showed me the Canadian one. The picture was proud, his chest and jaw lifted, with an aura of redneck radiance that is pure, dumb vitality.

“I’m gonna wear these passports out,” he said.

Nathalie’s eyes were big. “I wish I had your courage.”

He blushed and bit his lip and pushed up his cheeks and looked away. He was fabulously handsome, and I looked away too. Courage wasn’t the right word for selfishly roaming the world in search of trivial pleasures. I asked if he was hungry.

“Damn, I been on the road all day,” he said, his accent back in force. “My stomach feels like a hamster wheel spinnin’”—he smiled at Nathalie—“only there ain’t no hamster.”

She laughed, and I got up to feed him. Nathalie and I ate a bit but mostly watched Hugh destroy the last of my Chef Boyardees and whatever decent foods Nathalie had smuggled in. Sated, he talked until his head balanced on his hand and his eyes drooped.

“Are you tired?” Nathalie asked.

“Nah,” he said, “no way.” He gave himself a bronco shake. “My face is just falling asleep.”

Sometime after 3:00 a.m., as I was sneaking into the kitchen for another cup of instant coffee with a shot of maple syrup (my current compromise to remain alert after Nathalie banned me from sucking on sugar cubes), the hide-a-bed creaked in the living room.

“Hey, Andrew, is that you?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“How’s the thesis coming?”

“It’s not at the moment. I’m just getting coffee.”