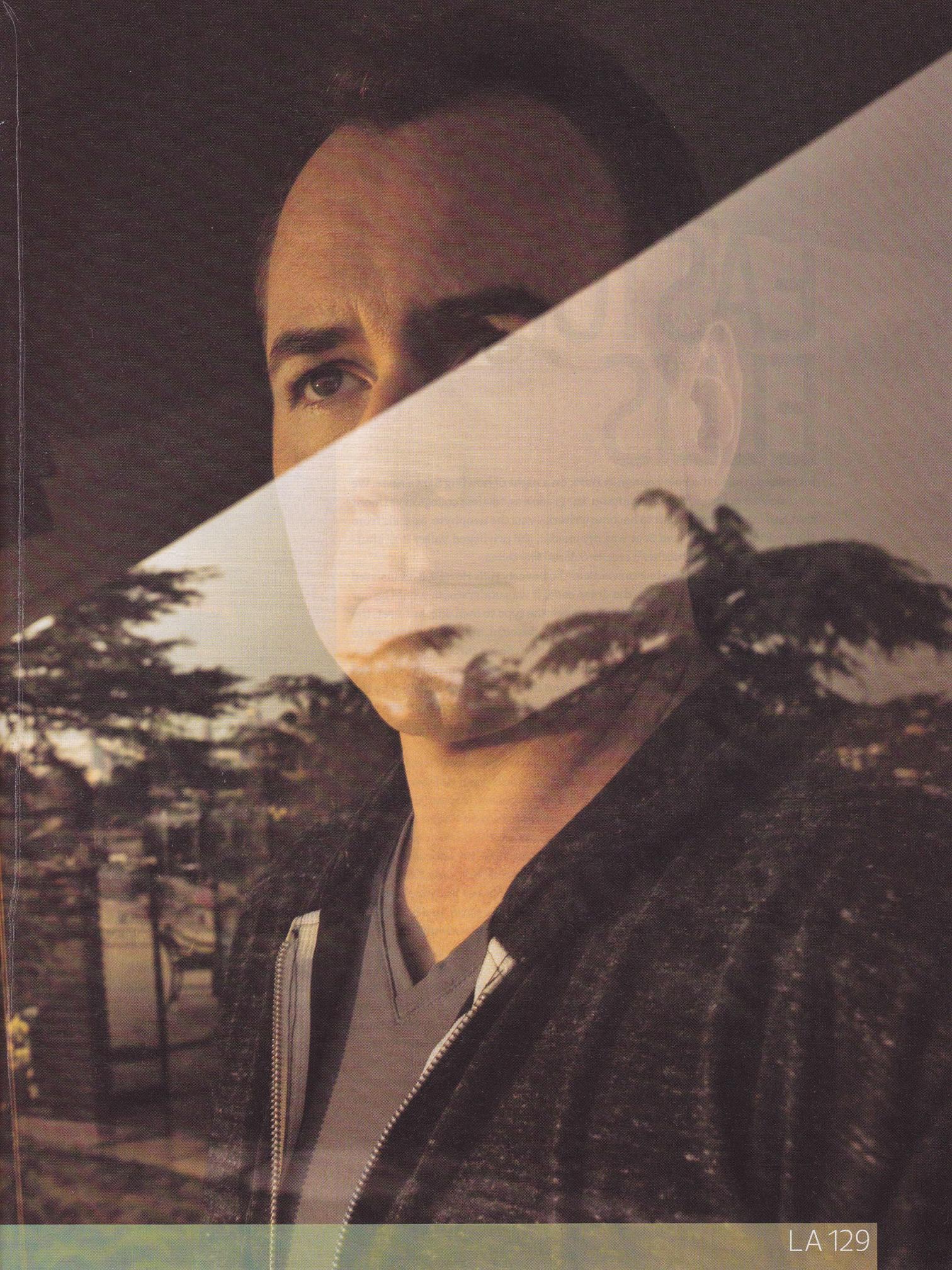


REFLECTIONS OF A VALLEY BOY

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AFTER *LESS THAN ZERO*, BRET EASTON ELLIS HAS WRITTEN A SEQUEL THAT FOLLOWS THE TEENS OF HIS BREAKOUT NOVEL INTO MIDDLE AGE. AS *IMPERIAL BEDROOMS* HITS STORES, THE AUTHOR RECONNECTS WITH A FRIEND WHO KNEW HIM BACK IN THE DAY

BY JESSE KATZ |||| PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHERYL NIELDS





BRET EASTON ELLIS

introduced me to the Polo Lounge in 1984, on a night of howling Santa Anas. We were on winter break from Bennington, the gradeless, testless college in Vermont that had made us both want to become writers. I was the neophyte, an exile from the Pacific Northwest, and Bret was my insider, the privileged Valley Boy, shuttling me around in his mother's cream-colored Mercedes.

To worm our way into a bar as swank as the Beverly Hills Hotel's, Bret insisted on our wearing ties. Bowing to the dress code, it was understood, would be our best defense against getting carded. I was not the type to own one, but Bret, the product of a Sherman Oaks prep school, had a closetful, and so we detoured to his house to get me a loaner, and then wound back down through the canyons, through twisters of dust and fronds, and just as we made our entrance, all duded up, the lights of the Polo Lounge flickered and died. We did our drinking by the glow of emergency candles. The following year, when *Less Than Zero* was published and Bret became the enfant terrible of Gen X lit, the Polo Lounge was right there, dark and decadent, on page 17.

Twenty-five years and five novels later, Bret has written a sequel to his debut, a tortured portrait of power and desperation in middle-aged Hollywood whose title once more channels Elvis Costello: *Imperial Bedrooms*. Due out June 15, with a first printing by Knopf of 100,000, it is *Less Than Zero* on Viagra and Xanax. The aimless teenagers have grown into ambitious adults, more accomplished, better connected, and yet the L.A. they inhabit, a universe Bret documents with unnerving familiarity, is no less vacant or toxic. *Imperial Bedrooms*, I am pleased to report, also features a Polo Lounge scene, a blur of booze and smoke on the patio, in a booth, next to a heat lamp—and so it is on the patio, in a booth, next to a heat lamp that I find myself with Bret again, the years rewinding and fast-forwarding at once.

"This is craaaazy," he says. "What are we doing?"

Bret is taller than I remember him, a good six feet, and leaner, the almost cartoonish New Wave cherub of his early dust jackets now a taut and tempered 46-year-old man, his hair a little thinner, a little oranger. He is dressed more for a night at Barney's Beanery—jeans, hoodie, tattered peacoat—than for an old-world watering hole, one that no longer requires neckwear but still requests "business casual" attire. When our server comes, Bret asks her to recite the tequilas. He settles on a Don Julio Blanco. "Can you make that in a margarita, on the rocks, no salt?" he adds. "And a shot on the side? And a glass of ice?"

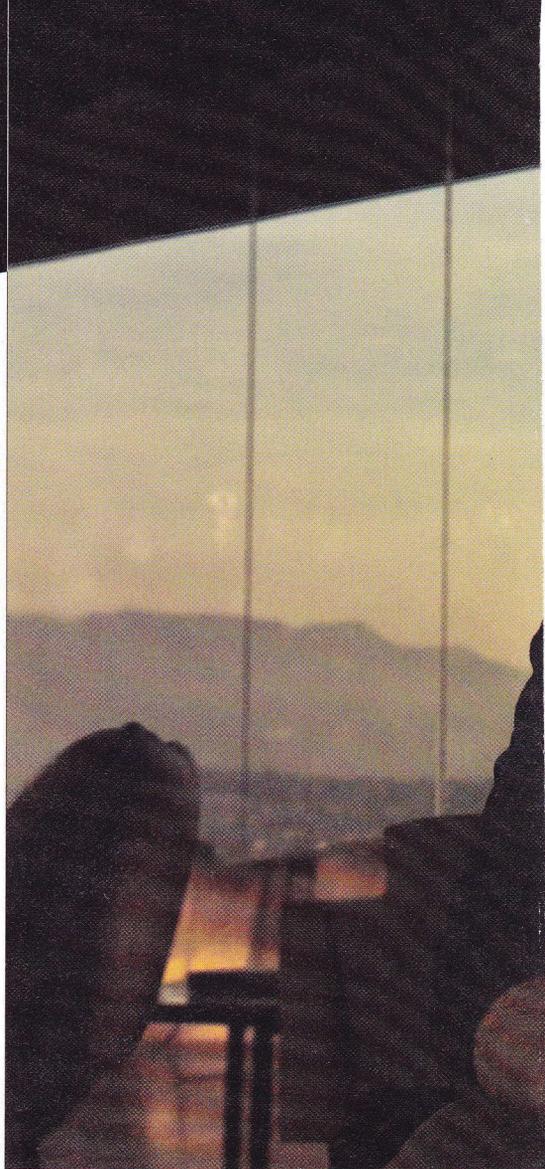
Whatever weirdness is inherent in practicing journalism on a friend—in toasting while interviewing, catching up while taking notes—the real oddity, as Bret is quick to point out, is that we are engaged in such an antiquated exercise at all. Promoting a novel in the era of Twitter? Profiling an author in the land of

TMZ? Printing words on paper to celebrate the printing of yet more words on paper? "That whole notion of publishing as this lofty thing that everyone aspires to—to become famous because of a first novel—it's gone," says Bret, drumming his fingers on the linen tablecloth, itching for a smoke. "It can't happen again. We're in the post-empire. A post-Bret Easton Ellis world."

Bret Easton Ellis, I remind him, is still a pretty formidable brand.

"Go on, write whatever down," he says. "I don't care. Just write the goddamn article now."

IT IS ASTONISHING to think how much time has passed, how a book as brutally desolate as *Less Than Zero* could already be the stuff of nostalgia. (A 25th-anniversary edition was published in May.) Bought for \$5,000 and marketed as *Catcher in the Rye* for the MTV age, the story is narrated by Clay, a freshman home for Christ-



SHERYL NIELDS/COPIOUS MANAGEMENT; GROOMING: CAROLA GONZALEZ/CLOUTIER REMIX; CLOTHES: LISA KLINE T-SHIRT, BACO PRIDE HOODIE; LOCATION: SILVERTOP, SILVER LAKE



LESS IS MORE:
Ellis at John
Lautner's Silvertop
house, the main
location for the
film version of his
debut novel

mas from a New England college, and in a series of spare, cinematic haikus, it follows him through a somnambulant haze of sex and drugs and depravity. So deadpan are the depictions that Michiko Kakutani of *The New York Times* famously called it “one of the most disturbing novels I’ve read in a long time.”

Although he has always insisted that his writing is not autobiographical—or at least that parsing his writing for autobiographical clues does it a disservice—Bret happily blends fiction with fact and feels no duty to disentangle the two. His narrators may be gay or straight or neither, at once addled and observant, partakers, messengers, validators, indictors, proof of the author’s immorality or amorality or maybe even of his covertly moralistic nature. “A book is a dream,” says Bret, whose mother still lives in the family home on Valley Vista, and whose father, a Century City real estate investment analyst, was until his death a source of extravagance and instability. “You’re writing the book to figure out why you’re writing the book.”

Like *Less Than Zero*, with its sly opening line about freeways and merging, *Imperial Bedrooms* begins on a meta note: “They had made a movie about us.” Which they had, in 1987, and it was partly Hollywood’s sanitization of the material, the sentimentalization of a lost L.A. generation, that led Bret to write *Imperial Bedrooms*. As a sequel, it is not so much an update but a reclaiming. “I was very conscious of the reputation of *Less Than Zero* and how it has been taken away from me basically and reinvented by fans, and how it seems to be emblematic of some kind of rah-rah ‘80s artifact, like John Hughes movies or Ray-Bans,” he says. “I meet so many people who say, ‘Oh, you wrote *Less Than Zero*? That’s the book that made me want to move to L.A.’ And I’m, like, ‘Really?’ Half its audience misreads it as something very glamorous and alluring and seductive.”

Our server drops by again. The storm that had drenched the pink bricks and green awnings that morning has blown through, but the night is crisp, a bristly wind raking

the palms, jostling the bougainvilleas. “I just want to make sure you’re OK,” she says.

“Are you OK?” Bret asks me.

“I’m OK,” I say.

“We’re the only people out here,” Bret says.

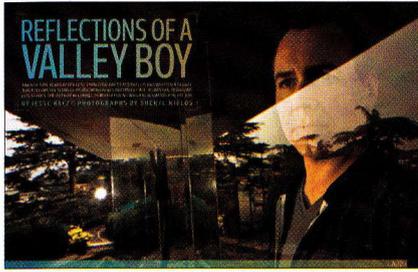
“It’s OK,” our server says. “You can just party it up.”

“Can we smoke if there’s nobody out here?” Bret asks.

“Yes,” she says, “but you didn’t hear that from me.”

The Marlboro Lights come out, then another \$14 glass of Don Julio. The edges are softening, the gaps beginning to fill in. Bret’s eyes roll back a fraction under fluttering lids. “I interrupted you,” he says. “The brand...the empire...”

My point, I think, was that if the empire has, indeed, imploded—if the machinery that once discovered and promoted and sustained authors has collapsed in the shift to a digital culture—all the more reason for Bret to be pushing [CONTINUED ON PAGE 161]



Bret Easton Ellis

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 131] *Imperial Bedrooms*, to be ensuring that his brand, his identity as a storyteller, survives. Every writer today is having to figure that out.

“Correct,” he says.

“Your ability to market yourself and gain value from who you are is more entirely your responsibility,” I say.

“And I am glad,” he says.

“Being responsible for ourselves,” I say, “that’s terrifying and yet ultimately, maybe, liberating.”

“Like love,” he says. I snort with laughter, certain that nothing so earnest could be coming from Bret, but he takes a long pull on his cigarette and says it again. “Like love, Jesse.”

This is the flip side of being a brand: Hidden behind the ennui and the Wayfarers, lost in the name-dropping, club-hopping, coke-snorting Brat Pack caricatures, is an intellectually nimble, wickedly funny, and, dare I say, disarmingly sensitive soul. Bret may traffic in nihilism and debauchery—as a chilling satirist if you are a fan, as a banal glamorizer if you are not—but in the empty courtyard of the symbolic Hotel California, on a night when L.A. is a shimmering mirage, he is expansive and eloquent, clever, generous, vulnerable. “I had a really rough time adjusting to being an adult back here,” says Bret, who bought a condo in West Hollywood in 2006 after spending most of his postcollege years in New York. “The force of the alienation and isolation of the city really hit me full on in a way that it never had. Regardless of if you’re in a relationship or have a lot of friends or whatever—in L.A., it doesn’t matter. You’re still alone a lot of the time. It’s just a totally different idea of living. Can you tell me where in Manhattan this would be happening right now? Literally, where in Manhattan? A deserted Polo Lounge patio. God. This is it. This is really what Los Angeles is like, in a way.”

Although the Polo Lounge is not a version of the city I have ever claimed for myself, that long-ago visit with Bret, that haunting, melodramatic episode would prove to be one of the images that would entice me to make my life here after Bennington. “That night was part of my initial romantic attachment to

L.A.,” I tell him, and to try to explain, I recount what for me are its unforgettable elements: the tie, the convertible, the devil winds, the bartender serving us by candlelight.

“You just described that, and I almost got a chill,” says Bret, making a sudden reassessment of L.A. “Like I would not even put that in a book. That’s just too cool. *The power went out at the Polo Lounge*. Oh, please, cut it out. Get real.”

“By the way,” I say.

“What?” he says.

“This,” I say, unknitting the slate and salmon tie from my neck, a tie that has been hanging in my closet for more than half my life, “is yours.”

“I thought it looked familiar,” he says.

“Did it?” I say.

“And it fits the Polo Lounge—pink, gray,” he says. “Nice touch.”

“It’s a little frayed,” I admit.

“So you’re giving it back to me?” he says. “No, you’re keeping it.”

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As in *Less Than Zero*, the Clay of *Imperial Bedrooms* bears some resemblance to Bret. The narrator is a moderately successful screenwriter who has just returned to L.A. from New York, and while helping cast his latest project, finds himself both ensnared and repulsed by Hollywood’s propensity for mutual exploitation. The story parallels Bret’s own disappointment with the filming of his fourth book, *The Informers*, a script that he wrote and coproduced but that “slowly deformed” into a movie he tried to disavow. “The collapse of that project had a lot to do with my depression and angst about the city,” says Bret, who in recent years has devoted himself as much to film and TV as to novels. “You’re always taught a fascinating new lesson.”

Text messages and Internet videos have replaced pay phones and Betamax—Equinox instead of Nautilus, Koi in lieu of Chasen’s, Reveal over the Roxy—but Clay is still navigating a terrifyingly soulless landscape of doctored flesh and leveraged couplings. If anything, his grown-up afflictions have turned darker, less detached. Clay has appetites now, a sense of entitlement, the clout to ruin, if not quite the explicit blood lust of Bret’s most infamous creation, Patrick Bateman of *American Psycho*. At a slim 192 pages, *Imperial Bedrooms* even comes with a plot, a pulpy Chanderesque mystery to unravel that seems ready-made for adaptation. “Narrated by a screenwriter,” Bret says. “Written by a failed novelist.”

Our server returns, eager to get an order in to the kitchen.

“What do I want to have?” Bret asks.

“I don’t know,” she says. “We can create whatever you like.”

“Really? Anything? Can you bring me a fountain of caviar?” Bret asks.

“A fountain?” she asks.

“And have two people, like, pouring it all over me while I’m just, you know, writhing in the booth,” Bret says. “That’s what I really want.”

The Polo Lounge makes its appearance on page 20 of *Imperial Bedrooms*, the setting for an awkward reunion between Clay and his troubled childhood friend Julian. Their conversation is cryptic, distracted, Clay already anesthetized from an evening of holiday parties. *It’s that time of night when I’ve entered the dead zone and I’m not coming out*.

“What’s the ‘dead zone?’” I ask Bret.

“It’s that part of the night...I guess...I don’t know...” he says.

“We’re not in the dead zone yet, are we?” I ask, and here it seems only fair to say that I have been matching Bret’s tequilas with gin.

He swirls his fourth Don Julio. “Getting there,” he says, and then, catching himself, “Oh, you’re going to end the piece on that, aren’t you? I know it. I should never have said that.”

“No,” I say, making an instant calculation. “I’m going to end the piece with you saying, ‘Oh, you’re going to end the piece on that, I should never have said it.’”

“Right, *that’s* the way you end it,” Bret says. “That’s the cooler way.” ■

Jesse Katz is a contributing writer for *Los Angeles* magazine and author of the memoir *The Opposite Field*. His profile of actor Bryan Cranston appeared in the May issue.

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