

# WHITE PALACE

BANTAM NEW FICTION



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WHITE PALACE  
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# WHITE PALACE

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For My Father

Special thanks to Deb Futter and Gail Hochman,  
whose help and encouragement were indispensable.

But in my arms till break of day,  
Let the living creature lie:  
Mortal, guilty, but to me  
The entirely beautiful.

—W. H. Auden  
“Lullaby”

# PART ONE





## CHAPTER ONE

Janey had never seen his high-priced apartment in west St. Louis County, much less lived in it, yet each evening when Max Baron arrived home from work, her absence still hit him like a piece of unexpected sad news. As usual, things had altered slightly while he was away. The evening sun threw a honey-colored rectangle across his glass-topped coffee table, lighting up a new film of dust, though he had only dusted two days ago. His philodendron plant which, according to his watering schedule should have been doing just fine, had lost a certain waxiness and sheen, and drooped a little. He checked to see that his black and gold Oriental rug was still perfectly flush with the cracks in the hardwood floor; it was not. Something, maybe the rotation of the earth, maybe the hand of a subtle poltergeist, had shifted it slightly out of whack. Max nudged it back into alignment with the heel of his shoe.

It gave him a kind of nervous satisfaction to see his basic grievance against reality confirmed once again by reality itself; nothing held still. Every time you turned around, something else had gone rotten, or fallen into

disrepair, or disappeared entirely. In a universe that couldn't be trusted, that could at any moment just as likely as not blow up in your face like a bomb, you had to carve out your own island of order and control, however arbitrary, however illusory, just to keep going. The fatalistic Japanese, with their absurd and deadly serious tea ceremony, understood this. Max understood it as well, and although he had to begin getting ready for the bachelor party of his closest friend, Neil Horowitz, which would be starting in less than an hour, he took the time out to water his philodendron, dust his coffee table, and by way of these ritual chores, pretend to keep chaos at bay.

Then he sat on the edge of his brass bed and undressed. He set his shoes side by side on the floor with their polished toes pointed in the same direction; he dropped his dirty things into the hamper; he hung up his slacks where they belonged—in among the other brown clothes. From left to right, the wardrobe in his closet formed a carefully graduated rainbow. This passion for organization could be seen all over his apartment. His bookshelves were arranged alphabetically, by author, and within each author's territory the books were lined up chronologically, like the children in a family portrait. His record albums were arranged the same way, with those eighteenth-century masters of sweetness and light, Bach, Haydn, Vivaldi, and Mozart, taking up most of the space. In his kitchen the copper-bottomed cookware hung separately from the aluminum pots and pans, and in his file cabinet the canceled checks and bank notes, the recipes cut from newspapers, the letters from friends on general topics and the letters of condolence, and the bundle of snapshots of Janey—which he did his best not to look at—were all relegated to their proper manilla folder. Since his childhood, when his room had been the only clean one in his mother's maniacally disordered house, Max had trained

himself in neatness. But following the death of his wife, this tendency had deepened to obsession, and now if his living space wasn't as logically laid out as a library, as immaculate as an operating room, he found that he couldn't sit still.

His days were as strictly arranged as his apartment. His work as an advertising writer took care of the first ten hours. It was the remainder of the day that he'd had to worry about, especially since the flood of dinner invitations that started after Janey's funeral had slowed to a trickle and finally dried up sometime last year, when the novelty of his widowerhood had worn off on everyone he knew except himself. There were basically six hours to get rid of before sleep. After straightening up his apartment and taking his second shower of the day, he would listen for a half an hour—flat on his back on the sofa with a black sock over his eyes—to Bach or Mozart or Vivaldi, until the flotsam and jetsam of his day at the office had been pretty well cleared from his head. After that it was time to watch the news, and after that, time to make dinner. Max refused to eat like a bachelor, and the care that he gave to his cooking usually insured that it was eight or eight-thirty before he sat down at the table. To carry him through until bedtime (eleven o'clock) he had devised a reading program. The idea was to choose a major author—Tolstoy, Dickens, Twain—and read everything by that writer he could get his hands on, however marginal, however dull. This established a small goal for him each evening, and moreover, relieved him of having to wonder what to do, whom to read, where to start, in those long silent hours before sleep finally took him from himself. Three weeks ago he had begun on the collected works of Shakespeare. He had thus far put behind him the sonnets, *Venus and Adonis*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and was now into the third act

of *Romeo and Juliet*. In another life, prior to Janey's death and his career switch to advertising, Max had been a high school English teacher, and he hadn't looked at *Romeo and Juliet* since teaching it. He found that his allegiances had changed. He used to identify most strongly with Romeo, and so, too, naturally, did his adolescent and hormone-crazed students, who viewed Romeo's morbid lovesickness and impetuous disregard for consequences as perfectly normal. But now Romeo made Max uncomfortable, and it was circumspect Juliet, instead, who came away with most of his sympathy. Her common-sense reply to Romeo's complaint on the balcony, "*O, wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied?*" had become, over the past two evenings, the mantra which had finally dipped him into sleep: *What satisfaction canst thou have tonight?*

Of course he wasn't happy. But he had given up on happiness since the rainy October night almost two years before when Janey had rolled her Datsun into a ditch off the side of Mason Road, and had never shown up again, not even as a corpse—for the coffin, in accordance with Jewish law, had been closed. He was, at least, surviving with dignity, and while he never kidded himself into thinking this was enough, it was certainly better than some of the alternatives. He had not lost his mind, or his will, or his decency, or, he hoped, his sense of humor. He had simply lost his taste for life, and that, he'd discovered, was not a prerequisite for living.

Max showered. Then he got out the rented tuxedo—mandatory dress for Horowitz's bachelor party—and put it on in front of his full-length mirror. As short as he was, with broad shoulders, short arms, and no ass at all, nothing ever fit Max before it was extensively altered. He hadn't given nearly enough lead time to the tuxedo shop to get the job done right, but it still irritated him that he was going to have to show up at a party—never mind that

it was only a party of drunken young men he had known since childhood—in something that didn't fit. The seat of the pants was baggy, and the bottoms sagged over the tops of his shoes. The shirt-sleeves were so long he had to roll back the cuffs before he put in the studs. Still, there was nothing to be done about it. Max affixed the white carnation to his lapel.

He had to admit that he was fond of his own good looks, and that he was probably far more vain than men less handsome than himself. One of Janey's favorite teases had been to call him her little Ken doll—although tonight he looked more like something that had jumped off the top of a wedding cake. His hair was a dense carpet of tiny black curls, and his face was baby-smooth, with large black long-lashed eyes and a petulant, feminine mouth. The trauma of his grief had failed to show up in his face. At the age of twenty-seven, many people still took him for twenty-two or twenty-three, and back in his days as a teacher he'd worn a full beard in order to bolster his credibility with his students. Now he was clean-shaven, and just as fresh-looking as ever. Max sometimes wished, when he was wallowing at the bottom of his grief, that his looks were more emblematic of his fate, that he bore some kind of facial badge that was adequate to his loss—maybe a jagged scar, or a missing eye, from having survived the accident. But he had been nowhere near the site of the accident when it happened. He was at home, cleaning up after dinner, when Janey, on her way to her aerobics class, had made whatever fatal mistake she had made. Neither Max nor anybody else would ever know exactly what had happened—whether she had sneezed, or braked for a dog, or fiddled with her radio too long, or simply let her attention drift away at a critical moment—for Janey had died alone. And now his handsome, unlined, unscarred face should have belonged to someone

else: someone, perhaps, who was still involved in the pursuit of women, and could have at least put it to some good use.

Max left his apartment, stopping outside the door to make sure it was securely locked. Then he got into his Volvo, reputed to be the safest car on the road, and drove east toward the city of St. Louis with his speedometer at fifty-five, both hands on the wheel, and his shoulders hunched with apprehension—so that anyone driving behind him could have easily mistaken him for a little old man.

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Horowitz, who had taken it upon himself to plan his own bachelor party, had booked a room at the Cheshire Inn—which was where, some fifteen years before, in a much larger room, his bar mitzvah party had been held. He did this, he told Max, partly for the sake of poetic symmetry, but also to prove to the frightened and unhappy thirteen-year-old boy inside himself that even fat ugly men could wind up getting what they wanted. Horowitz had remained a virgin until the scandalous age of twenty-four, and in marrying Rachel Fine, he was finally saying I-told-you-so to all the kids on the old block, starting with himself, who had doubted his manhood.

Max had grown up on that block—three doors down from Horowitz on seedy Raymond Street in University City—and he had been at that bar mitzvah party. As he crossed through the lobby of the Cheshire Inn, with its suit of armor and its tapestry of a unicorn hunt, Max remembered certain things so vividly, they might have happened an hour ago: how the feast had consisted of the unkosher combination of hamburgers and milk shakes; how he had

found Horowitz cowering in the men's room and feigning diarrhea because he did not want to be forced to dance with anyone; and how he had stolen away at one point with Janey Roth, who wore a yellow ribbon in her hair, and coaxed her into a janitor's closet somewhere in this hotel, and how, when she finally consented to kiss him, her breath had been redolent of potato chips. That had been an important moment. He had never fully realized before that girls were just as human as boys—that if they put something into their mouths, and you kissed them soon afterward, they would taste of it. Now, riding up the elevator, Max felt the thirteen-year-old boy awaken inside of him; the boy was staring with incredulity through all the intervening years at his rigid, mournful, twenty-seven-year-old self, who was no longer the sort of guy to exuberantly cajole a girl into a closet, and it didn't like what it saw. He was not supposed to have ended up like this.

Max walked down the hallway, watching for Horowitz's room number, and tried to shake his gloom. He was happy for Horowitz—never mind that he himself didn't feel happy—and did not want to do anything to sour the party. He experimented with putting a jaunty bounce into his step, but the pathetic insufficiency of this only depressed him further. He found the room and knocked. Horowitz yelled out to come in.

Max stepped into a bad smell. It was a stale, meaty stink, as if several couples had spent several days in this room engaged in a strenuous orgy without ever opening a window or breaking to bathe. The source of it stood in the middle of the room, in the middle of a card table: three fat white sacks surrounded by a litter of the small white cardboard boxes in which White Palace hamburgers were served.

The three tuxedoed young men avidly feeding there—Larry Klugman, Marv Miller and Horowitz—comprised,



along with Max, the old first string of the high school debate team which had made it to the Missouri State Semi-Finals on the strength of their handling of the topic *Resolved: That the Federal Government Should Continue to Provide Tax Incentives to Corporations*. They were the best team University City High had seen in years, and it was generally agreed that they would have gone all the way had Larry Klugman not lost his mind at a critical moment. Max had witnessed few things as painful to watch as Klugman simply standing there with his hands in the pockets of his checked sport jacket, his eyes glazed over and his mouth hanging open as if he were in silent communion with his ancestors, for the entire minute and a half of his final rebuttal. It was still, after all these years, the one thing you did not kid Klugman about. While Max had gone on to become first an English teacher and then an advertising man, and Horowitz had turned his hobby of photography into a lucrative profession (his specialty was gorgeous commercial photographs of food), Klugman and Miller had remained true to their original vision, fulfilled their early promise, and both became tax attorneys. For four men as young as they were, there was plenty of money in this room.

Horowitz wiped his mouth, rose from his chair, and came over to Max, his enormous landslide of a body straining at the confines of his tuxedo. The two of them embraced, and Max was lost in a wall of fat. Since Horowitz's engagement to Rachel and the dinners at her apartment every evening, he had grown more obese than ever. Max, on the other hand, had been slowly and steadily losing weight. It had been their odd sizes—Horowitz a hulking grizzly bear, Max a tiny doll—which had first drawn them together as children. Nobody ever wanted them on their teams.