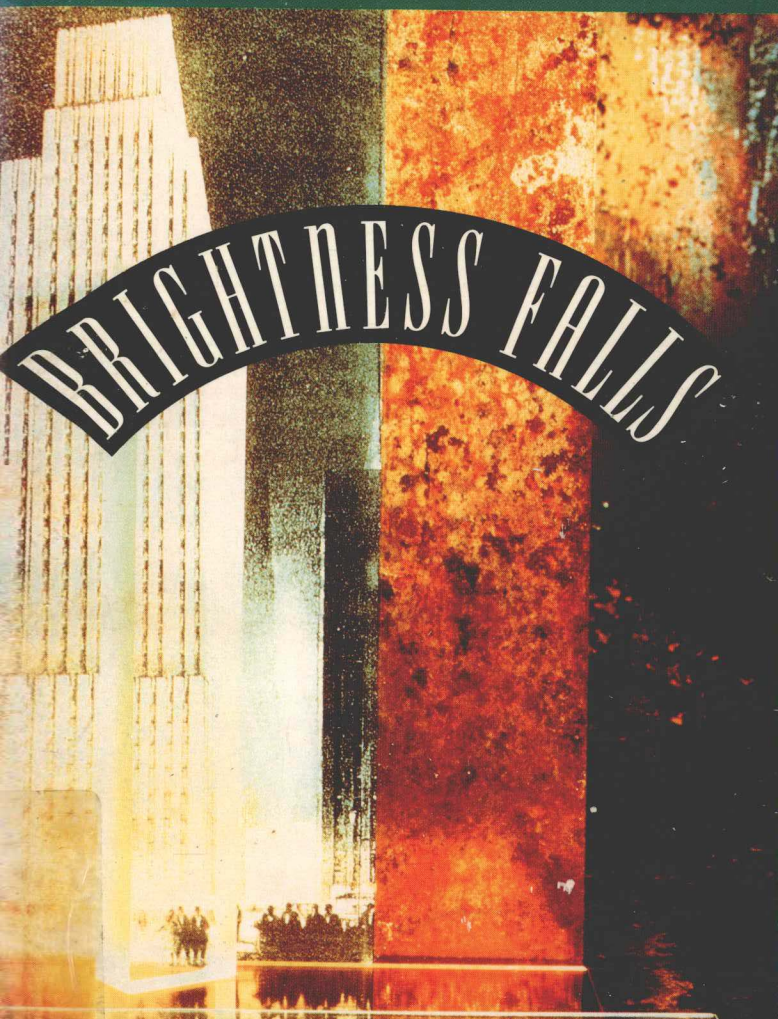


# JAY McINERNEY

Author of BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG CITY

## BRIGHTNESS FALLS



"A wicked pleasure to read...if this is [McInerney's] most ambitious novel, it is also his most giving." — Boston Globe

# BRIGHTNESS FALLS

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Jay McInerney

VINTAGE CONTEMPORARIES

*Vintage Books*

*A Division of Random House, Inc.*

*New York*

First Vintage Contemporaries Edition, January 1993

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This book's story and characters are entirely fictitious. The principal setting is the New York metropolitan area, and certain real locations, institutions and public figures are mentioned, but the characters involved in them are imaginary.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
McInerney, Jay.

Brightness falls / Jay McInerney. — 1st Vintage contemporaries ed.

p. cm. — (Vintage contemporaries)

ISBN 0-679-74547-5

I. Title.

PS3563.C3694B74 1993

813'.54—dc20 92-50604

CIP

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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## BRIGHTNESS FALLS

Jay McInerney is the author of the novels *Bright Lights*, *Big City* (which he adapted for the screen), *Ransom*, and *Story of My Life*. He lives with his wife, Helen Bransford McInerney, in New York City and Nashville, Tennessee.

ALSO BY JAY McINERNEY

*Story of My Life*

*Ransom*

*Bright Lights, Big City*

**B R I G H T N E S S F A L L S**

*for my father*

All the new thinking is about loss.  
In this it resembles all the old thinking.

—ROBERT HASS  
“Meditation at Lagunitas”



## A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

For bucolic shelter from the urban storm I would like to thank Carl Navarre, George Plimpton, James Salter and the Corporation of Yaddo.

For sharing their knowledge in various fields I am greatly indebted to Kate Bonner, Robin Carpenter, William Koshland, Ken Lipper, Mark McInerney, William Norwich, Ellen O'Toole, François de Saint Phalle and Chuck Ward.

For moral, oral and technical support I am very grateful to Gary, Binky, Marie, Morgan, Mona, Michael, Nick, Terry, Bret, Barry, Liz, Carl, Rust, Erroll, Sonny and Garth.

**B R I G H T N E S S F A L L S**



*The last time I saw Russell and Corrine together was the weekend of the final softball game between the addicts and the depressives. The quality of play was erratic, the recovering addicts being depressed from lack of their chosen medications and the depressives heavily dosed with exotic chemical bullets aimed at their elusive despair. Being myself among the clinically numb, I don't remember the outcome of the game now, though I submit that taken together we were as representative a group as you could hope to field at that juncture in history. It was the fall of 1987. The leaves in Connecticut were bursting, slow motion, into flame; one night, as we smoked on the porch after dinner, a girl in my unit who claimed to suffer from precognition declared that she could see paper airplanes crashing to the pavement of Manhattan, fifty miles away. Of course she would turn out to be right. But this was just before all that, before the big discount of gross expectations.*

*When they arrived at the hospital that Indian-summer day, I was sitting on the grass above the visitors' parking lot sucking a Marlboro, imagining how I might mince and dice them in their Cuisinart, because they were partly responsible for putting me in that white clapboard Bedlam, and because it was easy to disdain them as types—like a couple in a magazine ad, so patently members of their generation and class. Corrine's yellow hair and Russell's yellow tie flying like pennons of bright promise. Begin with an individual and you'll find you've got nothing but ambiguity and compassion; if you intend violence, stick with the type.*

*I was sitting with my friend Delia, whose arms were inscribed with a grid of self-inflicted wounds, an intricate text of self-loathing. Totally*

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scrambled by the good life, Delia had once been to a party at Russell and Corrine's, and as they rolled up the tree-lined drive in their open Jeep, her dead raccoon eyes seemed to flicker with recognition. They sprang lankily from their faux combat vehicle, in uniform faded jeans and blue blazers, and the normally mute Delia said, without irony, "Here's the Prince and Princess in their six-horse carriage." Sitting next to Delia on the hospital lawn at that moment, I decided it was almost a viable illusion—such was the contrast of their entitled, courtly bearing as they strode up the hill, with the inverted gazes and the stooped, shuffling posture of the inmates around me. In a sense they had always been that—the royal couple visiting fractured friends in the nuthouse, noblesse oblige. But marriage is a form of asylum, too. When I shackled up myself, I always heard the wild call of the world outside the door. And eventually it seeped under their door, too. But at that moment they weren't aware of being watched as they sauntered glamorously up the golden lawn toward the hospital, still focused on each other, not having made the transition from their separate world to communal space, and at that moment I almost started to believe in them again.

# I

Lemoning the sole fillets in the kitchen, Corrine hears her husband's voice louder than the rest, perhaps because it is louder, or because she's especially attuned to it. The voice now approaching from the hall, directed back into the living room but moving toward her: "I like the old version better." Russell didn't talk, he boomed.

"Old version of what," she asks, as he thumps into the kitchen, nearly filling it with his numerous limbs—one of those pre-war New York apartment kitchens not really intended for serious employment, but rather, it seemed, for the three-a.m. scrambling of a few Eggs Benny Goodman, after the Stork Club.

"Did I buy enough fish," he asks, replenishing her wineglass on the counter as he peers over her lightly freckled shoulder at the stove, and then surreptitiously down the front of her dress.

"Nice dress," he says. "Birthday girl."

"Thanks. Now you can complain about my hair."

They often debated her hair before a party: he likes it down, which he thinks is sexy; she prefers to put it up. Tonight it's pulled back in a loose golden French twist secured with black velvet ribbon, and he likes it anyway, approves of the idea of being married to this elegant creature.

"I thought we agreed you were positively going to stay out of the kitchen."

"What do you think of the Condrieu?"

"Please, no speeches about the wine tonight. Promise?"

"Only if you promise not to crawl around under the table orally servicing our male guests. Don't look at me that way. I know you."

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Just because you haven't done it yet doesn't mean you're not thinking about it."

"I think Jeff's date will probably beat me to it."

"God, I hope so."

"Where do you suppose he found this one?"

"He lifted up the tablecloth and *voilà!* There she was."

"So where's the colander?"

"Wash wore it home after the last party."

"Do you wish you could date girls like that," Corrine asks, suddenly serious.

"God, Corrine, don't *ask* me that."

"*Russell*," she groans, turning away from the counter with a crushed lemon half in her hand, looking up at him with doleful eyes.

"I like the old version better," he says again, taking her in his arms.

She reaches back and unhooks his hands. "You shouldn't use that word with a girl who just turned thirty-one. God, thirty is one thing—"

"Which word?"

"The O word."

"You're still my blonde bombshell."

"A mere shell of my former bomb."

He grabs her again. "Have I ever told you you look like the young Katharine Hepburn?" He has, of course. That's why it was important to say it again; like all marriages of any duration, theirs has its ritual incantations. And Russell thought of his wife as embodying certain Kate-like virtues: the flinty beauty suggestive of a sinewy Anglo-Saxon bloodline, the faint smattering of freckles suggestive of a Celt in the woodpile. He is of Hibernian extraction himself, a fourth-generation County Cork Calloway by way of Boston and Detroit.

"I was trying for Grace Kelly," she says.

The formula satisfied, she is self-possessed again.

"Where the hell is Washington? I'm almost ready to serve."

"You know Wash. Probably feeding the dog."

"Five years ago this bad-boy shtick had more charm."

"So says the den mother of the bad boy scouts."

"Is Jeff high?"

"On what?"

"That's what I'd like to know."

"He's fine."

"I think you should talk to him."

"I talk to him every day."

"I mean really talk."

"You mean really *leak*."

"Talking's not leaking. I *hate* it when you say that."

"Drip . . . drip . . . drip. Let's talk about our feelings, girls." Wielding the wine bottle like a microphone, he croons: "Feelings . . . whoa whoa whoa, feelings . . ."

"You're so sensitive, Russell."

"It's my curse. I *feel* everything so deeply," he says, grabbing her left buttock by way of illustration.

Corrine and Russell Calloway had been married for five years. They'd known each other eight years before that, having met in college. Their friends viewed them as savvy pioneers of the matrimonial state, as if they had homesteaded one of those formerly marginal areas of the city into which the fashion-conscious were just now beginning to follow. In the years they'd lived in New York, their East Side apartment had become a supper club for their less settled acquaintances, a sort of model unit for those thinking of buying into the neighborhood of matrimony. For the recently conjoined, it was a safe haven in a city that murdered marriages, and the unpaired found relief here from the strenuous formlessness of single life.

Not even their college friends, of whom there were fewer each year, could quite remember them separately. Individually they were both perhaps a little too attractive, but marriage neutered the appeal just enough that men who had been daunted by Corrine Makepeace at Brown, where she was something of an erotic totem figure, could now flirt with her safely while the women confided in Russell, drawing him into the bedroom for urgent conferences. It was a measure of the trust between them that Corrine seldom thought to be jealous on these occasions; a measure of the heat of her passion that, sometimes, frangible objects were hurled in anger. Sophisticated as they could appear, Russell and Corrine shared an almost otherworldly quality, being so long shielded from the bruising



free market of romance, having answered that large question early in their lives. Like Scandinavians, they inhabited a hygienic welfare state the laws of which didn't necessarily apply outside the realm, and sometimes, when one of them expressed an opinion, an outsider wanted to say, Sure, that might be true for you two, but the rest of us, we're still trying to find a warm body.

If it seemed exemplary, their estate also looked attainable. Though it commanded a view of the great city spreading south from a small terrace like a buffet of lights, the apartment was only a one-bedroom rental, the antiques juxtaposed with dorm-room salvage. One of the two couches was beginning to divulge its stuffing, and an overflow of books from the built-in shelves in the living room was housed in a low-income unit made of cinder blocks and unpainted pine planks. Photographs of Russell and Corrine and friends, indiscriminately framed in Tiffany silver and cheap plastic, hung between Galerie Maeght posters and signed lithographs. They entertained in a liberal and stylish manner which to some guests suggested an abundance of this world's blessings. In fact, their finances were perennially precarious. They had two incomes, but Russell toiled in the historically underpaid field of publishing and Corrine had been a stockbroker for only two years. Their joint tax return was modest by the boomtown standards of many of their friends and neighbors.

After nearly collapsing in bankruptcy during the seventies, their adoptive city had experienced a gold rush of sorts; prospecting with computers and telephones, financial miners had discovered fat veins of money coursing beneath the cliffs and canyons of the southern tip of Manhattan. As geologic and meteorological forces conspire to deposit diamonds at the tip of one continent and to expose gold at the edge of another, so a variety of manmade conditions intersected more or less at the beginning of the new decade to create a newly rich class based in New York, with a radical new scale of financial well-being. The electronic buzz of fast money hummed beneath the wired streets, affecting all the inhabitants, making some of them crazy with lust and ambition, others angrily impoverished, and making the comfortable majority feel poorer. Late at night, Russell or Corrine would sometimes hear that buzz—in between the sirens and the alarms and the car horns—worrying vaguely, clinging to the very edge of the credit limits on their charge cards.

Socially acute observers could read in Corrine's manner the secret code