

FLAMINGO



miss wyoming

DOUGLAS COUPLAND

'His weirdest and most wonderful book so far' *Observer*

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Flamingo

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DOUGLAS COUPLAND was born on a Canadian NATO base in Baden-Söllingen, Germany, in 1961. His previous books are *Generation X*, *Shampoo Planet*, *Life After God*, *Microserfs*, *Polaroids from the Dead*, and *Girlfriend in a Coma*. He works as a designer and sculptor in Vancouver, British Columbia, and is currently writing his next novel.

From the reviews for *Miss Wyoming*:

'An astonishing novel... To imagine characters such as these finding redemption through mutual love should be impossible. Except, of course, that it is what many of us spend our time imagining every day, whenever we pick up a copy of *Hello* magazine or read a celebrity love story in a tabloid. This is Coupland's genius. He creates concepts that allow us to get to grips with our unimaginable, real-life, end-of-the-world news.'

NICHOLAS BLINCOE, *Literary Review*

'An extraordinary 21st century love story... Coupland isn't just funny, he is smart. What is striking is the way he organizes his sociological titbits, how he makes patterns out of the fuzz. *Miss Wyoming* can be read and greatly enjoyed as a jaunt, a merry frippery. At the same time though, there is something darker going on, beneath the stardust.'

EMRAN MIAN, *Glasgow Herald*

'If *Girlfriend in a Coma* was Coupland's dark, difficult Tricky album of a novel, then *Miss Wyoming* is his perky, polished Britney Spears radio edit. Its terrain is the trash-strewn byways of failed celebrity, its principal characters a washed-up action-movie producer and a fallen beauty queen. Both seek to escape their punchline fate through doomed bids for anonymity, finally finding some meaning among the wreckage of their lives... That might sound worryingly insubstantial, but with such acute social commentary and sparkling prose, who's complaining?'

The Face

'Another fantastically affecting tour through latter-day Americana... its seemingly effortless understanding of the modern world is a joy.'

Select

'Coupand manipulates the two narratives with devilish mastery: Susan and John's stories mirror each other, almost touch, then move away... As John notes, you reach a moment in life when thereafter "it's reruns". For Coupand, soothing of the anxious generation, the only way to break the loop is with love, and that's exactly what his characters are holding out for. There is more than enough fret and fizz here to keep you simmering.'

JAMES HOPKIN, *Guardian*

'Along the way, as ever, Coupand sets out wonderful observations... Much more entertaining than reading any of those worthy comes about changing your life.'

PETER CARRY, *Time Out*

'Coupand's smartly written, satirical novel, animated throughout by his trademark exaggerated similes, takes a scalpel to various kinds of plastic American celebrity. He is remarkably good at entertainingly sending up the grotesque milieu from which his protagonists flee, and atmospherically depicting the altered perspectives they gain in flight.'

Sunday Times

'As his characters yearn for purity, the prose and the story itself sparkle with the cleanliness of the polished phrase. There are marvellous asides of oddness righting itself, and Coupand knows enough about the worlds he satirizes for the ring of truth to come through... For better or worse you feel at home in Coupand's world, not so much because of the snap, crackle, pop references – the electric current of the insistent now – but because threading beneath it is the familiar tale of the love story as redemption. And in the world as Coupand writes it, an old-fashioned love story is all you need.'

WILLIAM GEORGIADIS, *Spectator*

'Miss Wyoming, like all his novels, is weird, wonderful, highly original, on occasion laugh-out-loud funny, yet always underpinned by an air of desperation.'

NICK JOHNSTONE, *Uncut*

'Coupand at his best can make a single phrase say more than many another writer's whole novel.'

JENNY TURNER, *London Review of Books*

Miss Wyoming

Chapter One

Susan Colgate sat with her agent, Adam Norwitz, on the rocky outdoor patio of the Ivy restaurant at the edge of Beverly Hills. Susan was slightly chilly and kept a fawn-colored cashmere sweater wrapped around her shoulders as she snuck bread crumbs to the birds darting about the ground. Her face was flawlessly made up and her hair was cut in the style of the era. She was a woman on a magazine cover, gazing out at the checkout-stand shopper, smiling, but locked in time and space, away from the real world of squalling babies, bank cards and casual shoplifting.

Susan and Adam were looking at two men across the busy restaurant. Adam was saying to Susan, "You see that guy on the left? That's 'Jerr-Bear' Rogers, snack dealer to the stars and the human equivalent of an unflushed toilet."

"Adam!"

"Well, it's true." Adam broke open a focaccia slice. "Oh God, Sooz, they're looking at us."

"Thoughts have wings, Adam."

"Whatever. They're both still staring at us."

A waiter came and filled their water glasses. Adam said, "And that other guy—John Johnson. Semisleazebag movie producer. He vanished for a while earlier this year. Did you hear about that?"

"It sounds faintly familiar. But I stopped reading the dailies a while ago. You know that, Adam."

"He totally vanished. Turns out he OD'd and had some kind of vision, and then afterward he gave away everything he had—his house and cars and copyrights and everything else, and turned himself into a bum. Walked across the Southwest eating hamburgers out of McDonald's dumpsters."

"Really?"

"Oh yeah. Hey . . ." Adam lowered his voice and spoke out the side of his mouth. "Oh Lordy, it looks like John Johnson's fixated on you, Sooz, gawping at you like you were Fergie or something. Smile back like a trouper, will you? He may be gaga, but he's still got the power."

"Adam, don't tell me what to do or not to do."

"Oh God. He's standing up. He's coming over here," said Adam. "Lana Turner, be a good girl and tuck in your sweater. Wow. John Johnson. Whatta sleazebag."

Susan turned to Adam. "Don't be such a hypocrite, Adam, like you're so pure yourself? Know what I think? I think there's a touch 'o the 'bag in all of us."

John was by then standing a close but respectful distance from Susan. He looked at her with the unsure smile of a high school junior bracing himself to ask a girl one social notch above him to dance at the prom, his hands behind his back like a penitent child.

"Hello," he said. "I'm John Johnson." He stuck out his right arm too quickly, surprising her, but she took his hand in hers and slid her chair back onto the flagstones so that she could survey him more fully—a sadly handsome man, dressed in clothes that looked like hand-me-downs: jeans and a frayed blue gingham shirt, shoes a pair of disintegrating desert boots with a different-colored lace on each foot.

"I'm Susan Colgate."

"Hi."

"Hi to you."

"I'm Adam Norwitz." Adam lobbed his hand into the mix. John shook it, but not for a moment did he break his gaze on Susan.

"Yes," said John. "Adam Norwitz. I've heard your name before."

Adam blushed at this ambiguous praise. "Congratulations on *Mega Force*," he said. Owing to John's radical decision of the previous winter, he was not making a single penny from his current blockbuster, *Mega Force*. In his pocket were ninety \$20 bills, and this was all the money he had in the world.

"Thank you," said John.

"Adam told me that you're a sleazebag," said Susan. John, caught completely off guard, laughed. Adam froze in horror, and Susan smiled and said, "Well, you did say it, Adam."

"Susan! How could you—"

"He's right," said John. "Look at my track record and he'd be bang on. I saw you feeding birds under the table. That's nice."

"You were doing it, too."

"I like birds." John's teeth were big and white, like pearls of baby corn. His eyes were the pale blue color of sun-bleached parking tickets, his skin like brown leather.

"Why?" Susan asked.

"They mind their own business. No bird has never tried to sneak me a screenplay or slagged me behind my back. And they still hang out with you even if your movies tank."

"I certainly know that feeling."

"Susan!" Adam interjected. "Your projects do well."

"My movies are crap, Adam."

Across the terrazzo, Jerr-Bear made the *ah-oooo-gah, ah-oooo-gah*

noise of a drowning submarine in order to attract John's attention, but John and Susan, alone among the annoyed lunchtime crowd, ignored him.

Adam was trying to figure a way out of what he perceived as a dreadful collision of *faux pas*, mixed signals and badly tossed banana cream pies, and said, "Would you and your, er, colleague, like to join us for lunch, Mr. Johnson?"

John suddenly seemed to realize that he was in public, in a restaurant, surrounded by people bent on eating food and gossiping, and that this was the opposite of the place he wanted to be. He stammered, "I—"

"Yes?" Susan looked at him kindly.

"I really need to get out of here. You wouldn't want to come with me on a—I dunno—a walk, would you?"

Susan stood up, catching Adam's bewildered eyes. "I'll call you later, Adam."

Staff scurried about, and in the space of what seemed like a badly edited film snippet, John and Susan were out on North Robertson Boulevard, amid sleeping Saabs and Audis, in dazzling sunlight that made the insides of their eyeballs bubble as though filled with ginger ale.

"Are you okay for walking in those shoes?" John asked.

"These? I could climb Alps in these puppies." She smiled. "No man's ever asked me that before."

"They look Italian."

"I bought them in Rome in 1988, and they've never let me down once."

"Rome, huh? What was going on in Rome?"

"I was doing a set of TV commercials for bottled spaghetti sauce. Maybe you saw them. They were on the air for years. They spent a fortune getting everybody over there and then they shot it inside a studio anyway, and then they propped it with cheesy Italian stuff, so it looked like it was filmed in New Jersey."

"Welcome to film economics."

"That wasn't my first lesson, but it was one of the strangest. You never did commercials, did you?"

"I went right into film."

"Commercials are weird. You can go be in a reasonably successful TV weekly series for years and nobody mentions it to you, but appear at three A.M. in some god-awful sauce plug, and people phone to wake you up and scream, 'I just saw you on TV!' "

A mailman walked by, and once he'd passed John and Susan, in cahoots they copied his exaggerated stride, then made devilish faces at each other.

"You gotta hand it to him," Susan said about the mailman, now out of earshot, "for a guy his age, he sure works it."

"How old do you think I am?" asked John.

Susan appraised him. "I'll guess forty. Why do you ask?"

"I look forty?"

"But that's good. If you're not forty, then it means you've accrued wisdom beyond your, say, thirty-five years. It looks good on a man."

"I'm thirty-seven."

"You still haven't told me why you asked."

"Because I think about how old I am," John replied, "and I wonder, Hey, John Johnson, you've pretty much felt all the emotions you're ever likely to feel, and from here on it's reruns. And that totally scares me. Do you ever think that?"

"Well, John, life's thrown me a curveball or two, so I don't worry about the rerun factor quite so much. But yeah, I do think about it. Every day, really." She looked over at him. "For what it's worth, today is my twenty-eighth birthday."

John beamed. "Happy birthday, Susan!" He then shook her hand in a parody of heartiness, but secretly savored how cool her palms were, like a salve on a burn he didn't even know he had.

The novelty of strolling in their city rather than barreling through it inside air-conditioned metal nodules added an unearthly sensation to their steps. They heard the changing gears of cars headed toward the Beverly Center. They listened to bird-calls and rustling branches. John felt young, like he was back in grade school.

"You know what this feels like—our leaving the restaurant like that?" Susan asked.

"What?" John replied.

"Like we're running away from home together."

They walked across a sunbaked intersection where a Hispanic boy with a gold incisor was selling maps to the stars' homes. John asked Susan, "You ever been on one of those things?"

"A star map? Once, for about two years. I was deleted in a reprinted version. Cars would drive past my place and then slow down to almost a stop and then speed up again—every day and every night. It was the creepiest thing ever. The house had good security, but even then, a few times I was spooked so badly I went and stayed at a friend's place. You?"

"I'm not a star." Just then the Oscar Mayer wiener truck drove by and cars all around them honked as if it were a wedding cortège. Screwing up his courage, John asked, "Susan—Sue—speaking of curveballs, here's one for you. A simple question: do you think you've ever met me before?"

Susan looked thoughtful, as though ready to spell out her reply in a spelling bee. "I've read about you in magazines. And I saw a bit of stuff about you on TV. I'm sorry things didn't work out for you—when you took off and tried to change yourself or whatever it was you were trying to do. I really am." The wiener hubbub had died down, and Susan stepped in front of John to survey him. His eyes looked like those of somebody who's lost

big and is ready to leave the casino. "I mean, I've been pretty tired of being 'me' as well. I sympathize."

John moved as if to kiss her, but two cars behind them squealed their tires in a pulse of road rage. They turned around and the walk resumed.

"You were a beauty queen, weren't you?" John asked. "Miss Wyoming."

"Oh Lord, yeah. I was on the beauty circuit since about the age of JonBenet-and-a-half, which is, like, four. I've also been a child TV star, a has-been, a rock-and-roll bride, an air crash survivor and public enigma."

"You like having been so many different things?"

Susan took a second to answer. "I never thought of it that way. Yes. No. You mean there's some other way to live?"

"I don't know," said John.

They crossed San Vicente Boulevard, passing buildings and roads that once held stories for each of them, but which now seemed transient and disconnected from their lives, like window displays. Each recalled a bad meeting here, a check cashed there, a meal. . . .

John asked, "Where are you from?"

"My family? We're hillbillies. Literally. From the mountains of Oregon. We're nothing. If my mother hadn't escaped, I'd probably be pregnant with my brother's seventh brat by now—and somebody in the family'd probably steal the kid and trade it for a stack of unscratched lottery cards. You?"

In a deep, TV-announcer voice he declared, "The Lodge Family of Delaware. 'The Pesticide Lodges.'" His voice returned to normal. "My maternal great-grandfather discovered a chemical to interrupt the breeding cycle of mites that infect corn crops."

A light turned green and the boulevard was shot with traffic and the pair walked on. Susan was wrapped in a pale light

fabric, cool and comfortable, like a pageant winner's sash. John was sweating like a lemonade pitcher, his jeans, gingham shirt and black hair soaking up heat like desert stones. But instead of seeking both air-conditioning and a mirror, John merely untucked his shirt and kept pace with Susan.

"You'd think our family had invented the atom bomb from the way they all lorded about the eastern seaboard. But then they did this really weird thing."

"What was that?" Susan asked.

"We went through our own family tree with a chain saw. Ruthless, totally ruthless. Anybody who was found to be socially lacking was erased. It was like they'd never even lived. I have dozens of great-uncles and aunts and cousins who I've never met, and their only crime was to have had humble lives. One great-uncle was a prison warden. *Gone*. Another married a woman who pronounced 'theater' *thee-ay-ter*. *Gone*. And heaven help anybody who slighted another family member. People weren't challenged or punished in our family. They were merely *erased*."

They were quiet. They'd walked maybe a mile by now. John felt as close to Susan as paint is to a wall. John said, "Tell me something else, Susan. Anything. I like your voice."

"My voice? Anybody can hear my voice almost any time of day anywhere on earth. All you need is a dish that picks up signals from satellite stations that play nonstop cheesy early eighties TV shows." They were outside a record store. Two mohawked punk fossils from 1977 walked past them.

John looked at her and said, "Susan, have you ever seen a face, say—in a magazine or on TV—and obsessed on it, and maybe secretly hoped every day, at least once, that you'd run into the person behind the face?"

Susan laughed.

"I take it that's a yes?"

"How come you're asking?"

John told Susan about a vision he'd had at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center the year before that led him to make a drastic life decision. He told Susan that it was her face and voice that had come to him during his vision. "But what happened was that months later, after I'd gone and completely chucked out all of my old life, I realized I didn't have this great big mystical Dolby THX vision. I realized that there'd merely been some old episode of that TV show you used to star in playing on the hospital's TV set beside my bed. And it must have melted into my dream life."

It made a form of sense to Susan that this man with sad, pale eyes like snowy TV sets should have seen her as a refuge and then found her. Years before she'd stopped believing in fate. Fate was corny. Yet with John that long-lost tingle of destiny was once again with her.

A leaf blower cut the moment in two, and just as John was about to raise his voice, Cedars-Sinai came into view far in the distance, between a colonnade of cypress trees and a billboard advertising gay ocean-liner cruises. John's shirt was now soaked through with sweat, so they stopped at a convenience store and bought an XXL I-LOVE-LA white cotton shirt and two bottles of water. He changed out in the parking lot to the amused ogling of teenage boys who yelled out, "Boy supermodel steals the catwalk!"

John said, "Fuck 'em," and they crossed Sunset. It was getting to be late in the afternoon, and the traffic was crabby and sclerotic. They entered a residential neighborhood. Susan was feeling dizzy and sleepy and said, "I need to sit down," so they did, on the curb before a Wedgwood-blue French country-style house under the suspicious gaze of an Asian woman on the second floor.

"It's the sun," said Susan. "It's not like it used to be. Or, I can't take as much as I used to." She lay back on the Bermuda grass.

Suddenly worried he'd been the only one spilling the beans, John said, "Tell me about the crash. The Seneca crash. I'll bet you never talk about it, do you?"

"Not the full story, no."

"So tell me." Susan sat up and John put his arm around her. Staring at the pavement, like Prince William behind his mother's coffin, she told the story. And she might have talked to him all night, but two things happened: the lawn sprinklers spritzed into frantic life, and a Beverly Hills police patrol car soundlessly materialized. Two grim-faced officers got out, hands on weapons on hips. Soaked, Susan started to stand up, but her tired knees buckled. John helped pull her up, saying, "Jesus, we try and take a quick rest and in comes the SWAT team. Who pays your salaries, you goons? I pay your salaries. . . ."

"There's no SWAT team, Mr. Johnson. Stay calm," said one of the officers. "Ma'am"—he looked more closely at her—"Mrs. Thraice? Can we help you? Give you a lift? You were great in *Dynamite Bay*." *Dynamite Bay* was a low-budget action picture now in wide video release and not doing too badly. Adam had been proclaiming it as the revival of Susan's acting career.

She took a professional tone. "Hello, boys. Yes, I'd love a ride." She turned toward John and smiled regretfully. "I'm great for long walks but otherwise I'm not really *Outward Bound* material. Another day, another pilgrimage." She entered the rear passenger seat, and the officer shut the door. She rolled down the window. "To Beechwood Canyon, boys." She looked out at John. "You know—I don't even know my own phone number.