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# The Hilliker Curse

James Ellroy

# **THE HILLIKER CURSE**

MY PURSUIT OF WOMEN

**JAMES  
ELLROY**



WILLIAM HEINEMANN: LONDON

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*To Erika Schickel*



# THE HILLIKER CURSE

James Ellroy was born in Los Angeles in 1948. He is the author of the acclaimed 'LA Quartet': *The Black Dahlia*, *The Big Nowhere*, *LA Confidential* and *White Jazz*. His most recent novel, *Blood's a Rover*, completes the magisterial 'Underworld USA Trilogy' - the first two volumes of which (*American Tabloid* and *The Cold Six Thousand*) were both *Sunday Times* bestsellers.

ALSO BY JAMES ELLROY

The Underworld U.S.A. Trilogy

*American Tabloid*

*The Cold Six Thousand*

*Blood's A Rover*

The L.A. Quartet

*The Black Dahlia*

*The Big Nowhere*

*L.A. Confidential*

*White Jazz*

Memoir

*My Dark Places*

Short Stories

*Hollywood Nocturnes*

Journalism/Short Fiction

*Crime Wave*

*Destination: Morgue!*

Early Novels

*Brown's Requiem*

*Clandestine*

*Blood on the Moon*

*Because the Night*

*Suicide Hill*

*Killer on the Road*

I will take Fate by the throat.

—LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

*So women will love me.*

I invoked The Curse a half century ago. It defines my life from my tenth birthday on. The near-immediate results have kept me in near-continuous dialogue and redress. I write stories to console her as a phantom. She is ubiquitous and never familiar. Other women loom flesh and blood. They have their stories. Their touch has saved me in varying increments and allowed me to survive my insane appetite and ambition. They have withstood my recklessness and predation. I have resisted their rebukes. My storytelling gifts are imperviously strong and rooted in the moment that I wished her dead and mandated her murder. Women give me the world and hold the world tenuously safe for me. I cannot go to Them to find Her much longer. My obsessive will is too stretched. Their story must eclipse Hers in volume and content. I must honor Them and distinguish each one from Her. My pursuit has been both raw and discerning. The latter comforts me now. There were always grace notes in with the hunger.

It's been a fever dream. I must decorously decode it. They are all gone now. I'm unbodied without them. If I address them with candor, they'll cut me loose of the fury. My grasp may recede to a touch in retrospect. I'll find the answer in dreams and waking flashes. They'll find me alone and talk to me in the dark.

**PART I**

**HER**

# 1

The numbers don't matter. It's not a body count, a scratchpad list or a boast. Statistics obscure intent and meaning. My toll is therefore ambiguous. Girlfriends, wives, one-night stands, paid companions. Chaste early figures. A high-stat blitz later on. Quantity means shit in my case. Culminated contact means less than that. I was a watcher at the get-go. Visual access meant capture. The Curse incubated my narrative gift. My voyeur's eye pre-honed it. I lived a kiddie version of my twisted heroes thirty years hence.

*We're looking. We're eyeball-arched and orbiting in orbit. We're watching women. We want something enormous. My heroes don't know it yet. Their virginal creator has not a clue. We don't know that we're reading personae. We're looking so that we can stop looking. We crave the moral value of one woman. We'll know Her when we see Her. In the meantime, we'll look.*

A document denotes my early fixation. It's dated 2/17/55. It predates The Curse by three years. It's a playground shot in Kodak black & white.

A jungle gym, two slides and a sandbox clutter the foreground. I'm standing alone, stage left. I'm lurchlike big and unkempt. My upheaval is evident. A stranger would mark me as a fucked-up child in everyday duress. I have beady eyes. They're fixed on four girls, huddled stage right. The photo is rife with objects and children in lighthearted movement. I'm coiled in pure study. My scrutiny is

staggeringly intense. I'll re-read my mind from 55 years back.

These four girls bode as The Other. I'm a pious Lutheran boy. There can be only one. Is it her, her, her or Her?

I think my mother took the picture. A neutral parent would have cropped out the freako little boy. Jean Hilliker at 39: the pale skin and red hair, center-parted and tied back—my features and fierce eyes and a sure grace that I have never possessed.

The photo is a windowsill carving. I was still too young to roam unfettered and press my face up to the glass. My parents split the sheets later that year. Jean Hilliker got primary custody. She put my dad on skates and rolled him to a cheap pad a few blocks away. I snuck out for quick visits. High shrubs and drawn shades blocked my views en route. My mother told me that my father was spying on her. She sensed it. She said she saw smudge marks on her bedroom window. I read the divorce file years later. My father copped out to peeping. He said he peeped to indict my mother's indigenous moral sloth.

He saw her having sex with a man. It did not legally justify his presence at her window. Windows were beacons. *I* knew it in my crazed-child rush to The Curse. *I* entered houses through windows a decade hence. *I* never left smudge marks. My mother and father taught me that.

She had the stones. He had the bunco-artist gab and the grin. She always worked. He dodged work and schemed like Sergeant Bilko and the Kingfish on *Amos 'n' Andy*. The pastor at my church called him the "world's laziest white man." He had a sixteen-inch schlong. It dangled out of his shorts. All his friends talked about it. This is not a whacked-out child's reconstruction.

Jean Hilliker got bourbon-bombed and blasted the Brahms concertos. Armand Ellroy subscribed to scandal

rags and skin magazines. I got two days a week with him. He let me stare out his front window and fuck with his binoculars. My ninth birthday arrived. My mother got me a new church suit. My dad asked me what I wanted. I said I wanted a pair of X-ray eyeglasses. I saw them advertised in a comic book.

He yucked and said, Okay. He sent a buck in through the U.S. mail. My wait was grindingly attenuated. I made lists of all the school and church girls that I could see naked. I concocted ways to tape the glasses to my toy periscope. It would provide instant window access.

I waited—March, April, May, '57. Late spring through the summer. I couldn't track the sale. I had to trust the manufacturer's honor and efficacy.

The wait derailed my fantasy life. I spun out in new directions. I sat in my mother's clothes closet. I loved the smell of her lingerie and nurse's uniforms. I swiped my dad's binoculars and spied on a neighbor lady. I saw her reach under her blouse and pluck at her bra strap.

Fall '57. The Long Wait. Mickey Spillane wrote a book with that title. Spillane was the king of the anti-Commie thriller. My dad had a special shelf for his Spillane tomes. He said I could read them on my tenth birthday.

It's the Season of My Discombobulation. It's winging into the Withering Winter of My Dipshit Discontent. I was agitated. The TV news scared me. The Russians launched *Sputnik*. Colored kids caused chaos at Central High School. I was dreading Christmas. My mother had scheduled a trip to Madison, Wisconsin. We were going to see her sister. Aunt Leoda married a Catholic. My dad thought she was Red.

The X-ray eyeglasses arrived.

My dad forked them over. I unwrapped the package and put them on. I squinted through colored cellophane. I



peered around our living room. It was tinted turquoise.

The walls didn't melt. I couldn't see the crisscrossed beams under the plaster. My dad laughed at me. Sandra Danner's house was three blocks away. I sprinted there, full tilt.

Sandy and her mom were up stringing Christmas lights. I put my glasses on and stared at them. They laughed at me. Sandy touched her head and twirled a finger. It was '50s-speak for *He Craaaaazy*.

The glasses were a shuck. I knew about confidence schemes from *Whisper* magazine. Hucksters sold elderly stiffs plutonium mines in the Alps. They bilked the old cocksuckers and sent them to the poorhouse. I ripped the glasses into shreds of cardboard and cellophane. Sandy Danner went *He Craaaaazy* again. Her mom offered me a cookie.

I ran back to the pad. My dad was still laughing. He gave me my consolation prize: a new baseball. I chucked it out the window. My dad yukked and told me to shake a leg. We were going to a movie up in Hollywood. My flight east was that night.

The flick was called *Plunder Road*. Psycho losers loot a train loaded with gold bullion. Two of the guys had zaftig blond girlfriends. They wore tight blouses and pedal pushers. The theater was near empty. I moved closer for a better orb on the chicks. My dad lobbed Jordan almonds at my head and chortled.

The heist went bad. The Main Loser and the Main Blonde welded the bullion to the front bumper of her car and chrome-plated it. They headed out to T.J. on the Hollywood Freeway. Malign fate intervened. The Main Loser and Main Blonde got in a fender bender. An alert cop noticed the gold underplating and wasted the Main Loser's ass. The Main Blonde pitched some boo-hoo. Her big chichis shook.

The movie spooked me. My wig was loose. I didn't want to fly to Dogdick, Wisconsin. My dad strolled me down Hollywood side streets and cut north on Cherokee. He installed me on the front steps of a building. He said he'd be inside for an hour. He gave me a comic book and said, Don't roam.

I was a dirty-minded child with a religious streak. My shit detector clicked in, resultantly. My mom told a friend that my dad craved skirt action. I heard my dad use the term *fuck pad*. I concluded this: He's porking the Main Blonde from the movie.

I noticed a half-full jug of cheap wine by the mailbox bank. I guzzled it and got goofy and euphoric. I'm tanked. I go window-peeping.

Cherokee north of the Boulevard. Spanish apartment houses and bungalow courts. Windows ringed with Christmas lights. Low first-floor windowsills. Perch spots for a tall little boy hot to LOOK.

I was blitzed. It was 53 years ago. I know I didn't see the Main Blonde or my dad in the saddle. I know I saw a fat guy flipping burgers. I know I saw a skinny lady watching TV.

It all blurred then. Booze blackout—age nine.

I recall a queasy cab ride. I'm back at my mom's pad in Santa Monica. I'm in my church suit. We're on an airplane. Jean Hilliker's wearing a blue serge dress and holding an overcoat. Her red hair is cinched by a tortoiseshell barrette. She's drinking a highball and smoking a cigarette.

I leaned close. She misunderstood my intent and ruffled my hair. I wanted to nuzzle her and taste the bourbon. She didn't know that.

I dozed off. Jean Hilliker dozed off. I woke up and watched her sleep. She was 42 now. She was boozing more. It showed on her face. She went back to Hilliker, post-divorce decree. It stigmatized me. Her pride, my bifurcated

identity. I killed off the dregs of her highball and ate the cherry. It gave me a residual jolt. I saw a woman enter a lavatory at the rear of the plane.

I traipsed over and perched near the door. Passing adults ignored me. Women used the facility. I hovered and heard the door locks click. The women exited and scowled at me. I read biblical censure on their faces. One woman forgot to lock the door. I barged in accidentally on purpose. The woman shrieked. I saw sheer nylon stockings and some skin.

Madison, Wisconsin, was lake-bound and penguin-shit cold. A snow-covered field flanked Aunt Leoda's house. I got into a snowball fight the first day. An ice-crusting ball busted up my face and loosened some wobbly teeth. I holed up in a back bedroom and brooded.

My cousins were off being happy kids at Christmas. Jean Hilliker was off with plain-Jane Aunt Leoda and porky Uncle Ed. Uncle Ed sold Buicks. My mother purchased a red-and-white sedan from him. The plan: drive the fucker back to L.A. after NewYear's.

I brooded. The practice entailed long stints alone in the dark. I thought about girls then. I brain-screened girls I'd seen at school and at church. It was a pure visual panoply. I did not impose story lines. I have formally brooded through to this moment. I lie in the dark, shut my eyes and think. I think about women primarily. I quite often tremble and sob. My heart swells in sync with women's faces merged with improvised stories. History intercedes. Great public events run counterpoint to deep human love. Women glimpsed for half seconds carry a spiritual weight equal to my long-term lovers.

Bumfuck, Wisconsin, was a drag. My mouth hurt. The fucking snowball sliced my lips. I couldn't kiss Christine Nelson from school. My dad said he knew a TV babe named

Chris Nelson. She was married to a Hebe named Louie Quinn. Chris was a nympho. She flashed her snatch at him at some movie-biz party.

The adults came home. My mother brought me a library book. It was wholesome kids' fare, full of mystical shit. It pertained to witchcraft, spells and curses. My mother turned the bedroom lights on. I had to read rather than brood.

The book jazzed me. I tore through it quicksville. It felt like it was written for me. The mystical jive derived from my ancestral home of Shitsville, Great Britain. Magic potions abounded. Warlocks guzzled secret brews and had visions. This wowed the incipient boozehound and dope fiend in me. The overall text buttressed religious lore I believed in then and believe in today.

*There's a world we can't see. It exists separately and concurrently with the real world. You enter this world by the offering of prayer and incantation. You live in this world wholly within your mind. You dispel the real world through mental discipline. You rebuff the real world through your enforced mental will. Your interior world will give you what you want and what you need to survive.*

I believed it then. I believe it now. My many years in the dark have confirmed it as a primary article of faith. I was nine then. I'm 62 now. The real world has frequently intruded on my spells in the dark. That book formally sanctioned me to lie still and conjure women. I did it then. I do it still. That book described the destructive power of formal invective. The notion of The Curse did not feel prophetic in late 1957. It was simply a footnote to my license to fantasize.

I have a superbly honed memory. My time in the dark has enhanced my process of minutely detailed recollection. My mental ruthlessness asserted itself early on.