

Excerpts from *A Personal History of Want*

CHAPTER THREE, ages 17-19

We put words between ourselves and things.
—Thomas Merton

Wanting you-don't-know-what, L gifts you a copy of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, tells you to read the last fifty pages, only you find there is no punctuation, no cease to the voice. You end up reading only the dirty parts, which quickly feel incriminating, then misguided, because you cannot see yourself anymore.



if I can only get in with a handsome young poet at my age Ill throw them the 1st thing in the morning till I see if the wishcard comes out or Ill try pairing the lady herself and see if he comes out Ill read and study all I can find or learn a bit off by heart if I knew who he likes so he wont think me stupid if he thinks all women are the same **and I can teach him the other part Ill make him feel all over him till he half faints under me then hell write about me lover and mistress publicly too...**

—*Ulysses*, episode 18

Wanting touch, you offer to massage one of your friends in your dorm, and afterwards don't know what to say when she tells you: *Damn, if that's how you give a massage, you're probably a great fuck!*



or if I could dream it when he made me spend the 2nd time **tickling me behind with his finger I was coming for about 5 minutes with my legs round him** I had to hug

him after O Lord **I wanted to shout out all sorts of things
fuck or shit or anything at all** only not to look ugly...
—*Ulysses*, episode 18

THE SEVEN SINS OF WANT: *sensation*

Wanting not to stop thrusting into the astrologer from behind, even after her pug climbed up onto her mattress, which was on the floor, which meant the pug gave you no time to react, really, as he began to sniff and lick the back of your thighs, and would have done more had you not kept going, you thrust, keep each body in the room in motion, unable, afraid even, to ever stop, your heart in rhythm with the small, cold tongue lapping against you.

Wanting to make you laugh as she did when you were younger, making references to *el chile* and girls from school, your aunt asks you about college, about sex, tells you: *Si no lo usas, se te va caer*—*If you don't use it, it'll rot off*. This as you drive between Matamoros and Corpus Christi. This, along with questions, if you are staying out of trouble, have you silent for miles.



I often felt I wanted to kiss him all over also his lovely young cock there so **simple I wouldnt mind taking him in my mouth if nobody was looking** as if it was asking you to suck it ~~so clean and white~~ he looks with his boyish face I would too in 1/2 a minute even if some of it went down what its only like gruel or the dew theres no danger **besides hed be so clean compared with those pigs of men I suppose never dream of washing it** from 1 years end to the other the most of them only thats what gives the women the moustaches **Im sure itll be grand...**

—*Ulysses*, episode 18

Want to hear L's voice as you return a call from her number at a payphone, wait the rings, listen until on the other end you hear her husband bleat: *Stay away from my wife!*



~~of course the man never even casts a 2nd thought on the husband~~ or wife either its the woman he wants and he gets her **what else were we given all those desires for Id like to know...**

—*Ulysses*, episode 18

Want more in the back of L's minivan parked on the beach; waves break in the distance, salt and sand on your breath; your fingers make their way inside; L whispers: *Do you see how wet I am?*



CHAPTER FIVE, ages 4-23

The incident was a late night that didn't stop with a kiss. I thought that it would and it didn't.... And I kind of thought, 'Why can't it ever just be a kiss?'

—*Mary Kay Letourneau*

DIABOLOS:

The heart is deceitful above all
things, says the Bible.

Perhaps it only feels like deceit.
Perhaps it is only clouded, confused.

The heart only does
what it was made to do:

whatever it needs
to go on.



Wanting you-don't-know-what, one uncle spends your childhood showing up once a year in the middle of the night, banging at the door, sometimes

asking for money, sometimes asking for news about his son who was taken from him to live with another man, the mother never speaking about the father, you could hear it in the voice of his son, your cousin, who when he would ask a question, you barely noticed, his voice low, barely there, and when you would ask him to he'd never repeat himself.

DIABOLOS:

The deceitful heart

in the bus-kid's words:

If you don't crash a little

between doses, you can't

appreciate the difference –

in her smile that, even now

writing of it, cannot hold still,

keeps blotting the page.



Wanting you-don't-know-what, another uncle asks you not to tell anyone, then sits you down with a Sprite, strips to his underwear, and puts on a porno. You sit on the floor a ways away, he lies on the couch. This scene will repeat another time later. You are used to family in their underwear; it's South Texas, it's hot. Only you don't know what you're watching pass between men and women, what comes out of their bodies, what fluids, you think it beer, you're four, and later, when you admit this to someone, you think: *Why did I think of beer?*

DIABOLOS:

The deceitful heart in the way
the others pretend to like you

but their eyes when you speak
of the guy in the wheelchair,

his knees lumped knots
wriggling like happy fists

inside socks
when he counts his change

tell you
otherwise.



Wanting to keep a woman laughing, you agree to go to your first college house party because she is going. You and your roommate dress nice: button-ups, ties, cologne. You ride with her in her Jeep, and she lets you keep making her laugh, then, with a quick look back (you think perhaps guilt, or maybe it's your tie) leaves you at the door. You spend the night walking up to people you recognize from classes, but not knowing what to say. You sit on the stair; two women sit behind you. One says: *I swear, I need to have someone inside me by the end of the night*. Later, the woman you came here with stumbles drunk into your arms; you find yourself carrying her to her Jeep, stopping in the middle of the street when you notice snow has begun to fall. You tell her so (*look, it's snowing!*), and she pretends not to hear you, cradled against you as she is. When you get to her car, she murmurs she's fine, frowns, and drives you home in silence.

Wanting you-don't-know-what, a woman tells you she's been reading to her sister from the journal you left at her house the night before, says: *I wanted her to see who you were to me*.



DIABOLOS:

The deceitful heart drives
the man on the train

to go on about the devil
reaching out a hand to men

through women's backsides,
to then stand up

and in a louder voice call out:
Turn the simple fact

of your bodies
so that I may see your eyes.

Wanting to go to work during a blizzard because the co-worker you crush on, despite living with someone else, might be there (you learn the term “work-husband” much later and think, *That's what I was!*), you suit up in your apartment in Jersey City, tuck a book, a pad of a paper, and a pen close to your body, then trudge down the middle of snow-covered Summit Avenue, and only make it two blocks before a gust of wind lifts you up in the air (this actually happens), holds you there for a whole three seconds, after which you land as if pushed back, and decide to go home, call in to work, your co-worker saying: *Jesus, J, only a Mexican would try to go work in this weather!*



DIABOLOS:

Desperation a la deceitful heart:

The buildings appear to be reaching for God,

while people reach down
into their pockets.

THE SEVEN SINS OF WANT: *deception*

Wanting what you can't afford, you wait until you are alone at a party, the other kids off watching TV in another room, then slip two large stacks of comic book hero cards into your pockets, then wait outside on the porch to be found and taken home, the whole time voices rising behind you: *Where are they then, mom? If you didn't see him take them... I know he did, they're poor!* Later, when your aunt catches you organizing the cards in your toy crate under the kitchen sink, she yanks you by the arm and walks you to the stove, the flames already rising, waiting for your hand.

Want to be touched. Pay your money and the palm reader holds your hand in the half-light. Pay your money and in the pink glow of her neon sign, which blinks on and off, so between dark and pink flush you could be inside a mouth as it chewed a piece of gum, she tells you sex will be a problem. Tells you want will be a problem. Pay your money and she holds your hand, tells you from the lines there you had been destined for sainthood in a past life. Only thing, past-you could not have sex. Could not have want. Pay your money and you sit quiet, your hand in hers, the light of the room blinking from confessional dark to bar sign pink. You are twenty and want to be touched. You are twenty and want. Pay your money and sit listening a long time to the traffic outside. Pay your money and do not have to ask which want won out, the want to help or the want to help yourself. Pay your money and leave hot with what you know will continue to keep you from being prayed for.

Wanting you-don't-know-what, L gifts you a copy of James Joyce's *Dubliners*, says to read "Araby," find her favorite line.



DIABOLOS:

Summer. The screams of the sirens
do not seem to reach the man

led down the street by cops
who turn away

when he looks up and seems to read the sky,
the deceitful heart

deep in his mumbling: *Where are you taking me,*
where are you taking me?

Wanting to see the world as you were told to, you road trip to San Diego for spring break with two friends; only it was supposed to be just you and the one friend, you want it to be; only the friend asks her friend to come along; only you wonder if it is because you are a man; only you are not twenty-one yet, they are; only you notice they arrive at the end of the drive sporting matching

watches; only you spend most of your time avoiding them, pretending not to wake until they leave; only you spend the mornings doing Tai Chi, eating tuna from a can, reading all of Ginsberg's *Howl* aloud to yourself; only you want to throw yourself against the first friend, have wanted to since you met her, and maybe she sensed it, and maybe didn't know how to kick you out of her life; only you are throwing yourself against Ginsberg's bastard landscape of a poem instead; only you don't know what it means; only you feel you feel it; only you spend your time looking through books in different Salvation Army stores; only you begin wearing a camo jacket, thinking yourself Bono; only you wonder whose father wore this before you, did he go hungry, or angry, or lost; only you write poems into a notebook any chance you get to sit down, on street curbs, on mall benches, on park fountains, on the fire escapes of abandoned buildings, sitting with your back against a dumpster; only you begin to worry the two friends will bring guys to the hostel room you're staying in; only you hear two people having sex down the hall, the door open a crack, their voices in another language, their sex is another language; only you drive home completely silent, pretending to be asleep; only you get home and look through your notebook, realize you wrote nothing you want to read again, and tuck the book away; only years later you hear from a friend that the second friend from the trip responded to your name being brought up by saying: *Fuck that guy!*

Want to be a better poet, so you listen to a professor look over your poem and write down what he says about the lines:

*I sit alone in a pew
without a god
to walk on eggshells for –*

and stop writing when he says: *If it's the Christian god, then go ahead, say God, big "g."*



Wanting again to be worldly, you take the street artist in New Orleans back to your hotel room. You're in town to give a speech at a conference about how a scholarship that covered only one year's textbooks in undergrad changed your life. Instead, you read a poem about being broke in South Texas, then skip out on the rest of the conference to walk around the French Quarter. You meet

her by stopping to look at her art. She has a laugh (*that shakes the rain down*, you write later) as you both begin to take off clothes; she stops you at one point to say she can only go so far: *I've got something*. You catch your breath, say nothing needs to happen; she takes you in her hand and begins to work you, until you fall back onto the bed. Later, she takes a bath, lights a cigarette, and goes on a bit about how this would be easier if you were a woman.

Wanting you-don't-know-what, your babysitter, sixteen, strips you down first, then herself, then asks you to place your mouth on different parts of her body. You know from movies some of what is expected. She only stares and waits as you tug at your five-year-old manhood, hardening, stubbornly saying: *No, no, I can make this work*.



...**that train again weeping** tone once in the dear deead
days beyondre call **close my eyes** breath my lips forward
kiss sad look eyes open piano ere **oer the world the mists**
began...

—*Ulysses*, episode 18

Wanting you-don't-know-what New Year's Eve, you have L pick you up shortly after midnight from a party, wait on a street corner, glass of champagne in hand, and you drive with her to the beach, where you wake up in the backseat with L working her mouth on you. When you realize you won't be able to finish, you run out into the sand, throw your hands up in the air, and scream.



Want to remember L as saying she loved your hands, had watched them play guitar in the school hallway, had wanted to hold them, said they were good hands, but can only remember being curled around your guitar, strumming in an empty hallway, heart racing as footsteps sounded around the corner.

Want to remember always singing to your grandmother her son's favorite song, you used to walk around proud to say you only knew five things about your father, one of them being his favorite song was "Querida" by Juan Gabriel,

how you learned it on your guitar quickly when you heard she was in the hospital, how your mother thought it ostentatious to bring your guitar, and you said no, there's a reason, how you worked out the Spanish on your rough tongue, how you sang to your grandmother:

en esta soledad

en esta soledad—

and she rocked in her hospital bed saying: *Que lindo, que lindo*— that you don't know what the others in the hospital thought of you playing, only that you wanted to play, keep her rocking, part of your face reflected in her clouded eyes that could not see you, eyes that trembled at the chords and words, you swear to yourself sometimes all you want to feel is music.

I thought little of the future. I did not know whether I would ever speak to her or not or, if I spoke to her, how I could tell her of my confused adoration. But **my body was like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires.**

—James Joyce, “Araby”

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