

# HIGHWAY HYPNOSIS

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The top dresser drawer always stuck. Charles yanked and it came out at once, spilling old keys, lip moisturizers, double A batteries and a few condoms on the floor. Charles stared at the disarray, holding the empty drawer by its handle.

George opened his eyes. "What the?"

"It's that drawer again," Charles said, putting everything back but his wallet, which he pocketed.

"Hey, you're dressed. Where are you going?"

"I'm going out for breakfast. Want to come?"

"You're kidding, right? It's Saturday. Is the paper here?"

"On the dining table."

"Coffee?"

"The machine's set for two hours from now."

"Bread for toast?"

"Five grain. Bought it yesterday."

"Perfect. I'm going back to sleep." George grabbed Charles' pillows and hugged them to his taut, newly-waxed chest. He pulled the sheets and comforter up around him until only his sharp profile and black hair showed.

"See you later." Charles paused, framing the scene in his mind.

"Bye," the bedding mumbled.

Charles heard George snore faintly as he clambered down the half-twist iron stairs from the mezzanine, as they called their loft bedroom, to the living room. He rolled open the entry closet, selected an umbrella, and hoisted the large leather bag stashed inside, knocking down an old tennis racket.

"What's the racket?"

Charles smiled faintly. "I'm taking some newspaper down to the recycling bin."

"Couldn't you wait until afternoon to get all eco-minded?"

"Sorry. I'll try not to disturb you any more." He closed the door inaudibly. The elevator opened.

"Good morning, Charles."

"Oh hi, James."

"Going away for the weekend?"

"Yeah."

"Without George?"

"Visiting my parents."

"Oh? You know, Tom wanted me to ask you and George over Tuesday night. We could order some food, rent a movie."

"Sounds like every night of my life."

"I thought you liked our movie nights."

"I do. We both do. Tuesday's fine."

"Check with George and I'll call you later tonight about it."

"No. We'll be there. Call us Tuesday night when you're ready for us to come up." The doors opened.

"Anything you want to see?"

"Anything you want is fine. I'll watch any movie."

They walked past the desk, through the blue-carpeted, tree-lined lobby, out of the double doors bordered with glass brick, and into the noise and stark daylight.

"I've got to get a cab." He reached out a black gloved hand.

"Have a good weekend."

"You too." A cab pulled over.

"See you Tuesday."

"Tuesday." Charles got into the taxi. "Twenty-second between Second and Third. There's a garage in the middle of the block."

"Twenty-third between first and second?"

"No. Twenty-second between --. Just go uptown. I'll tell you when to turn."

Light rain beaded on the windshield of the rental car. The beads turned from red to green with the stop lights. Charles let the car flow with the stream of highway traffic headed to the southwest. A radio station played soft rock, timeless and ever-present.

He drove for an hour or more until, through the windshield wiper streaks, he saw the tall luminous sign for a fast food place. He parked next to a charter bus in the lot. Its passengers filled

the restaurant. Older men and women, each wearing a unique,  
unearthly shade of green,

carried trays to tables. He studied them as he ate a double burger and fries. He decided that they all must have been over sixty, and that their common ground must have to do with either a church or golf. Charles understood both pursuits only dimly.

"Excuse me, can I use your salt?" Charles swiveled to face a woman in an array of unnatural fibers. She looked a hundred years old. Her hearing aid wires twisted in and out of electroplated gold necklaces.

"Sure." He handed it to her.

The woman dumped salt on her french fries. "I'm so exhausted I think I'll collapse right here in my salad." She leaned in toward him and lowered her voice. "I've gotta tell you about it. It was like dying and going to heaven. Have you been to the other side?"

"The - other side?" Charles felt the small hairs on the back of his neck stand one by one.

"I've been there and I can't wait to go back."

"You've - been there?"

"It's like everything you always wanted, but better. You know how to get there?"

"I - uh. I'm not sure."

"It's like you're going through this tunnel and it's really dark, then you see a big light at the end. Okay, I'll tell you. You drive down there and you turn left. You go under the overpass and right before you get out, you see this big glowing neon sign.

It says: The Shoe Tree. It's where I got these." She held up a bag of shoe boxes. "They've got men's too."

"Oh." Charles took a breath. "Sounds like a near-shopping experience." Charles sipped his soda.

"And there's a coat place and a sweater place and an electronics place."

"Thanks for the tip. Can I have the salt back?"

"Oh, sorry honey." She handed it back. "You know you've got to watch that stuff. I'm not supposed to have it but, as I always say, you've got to die of something. You might as well enjoy yourself a little. We all went to Atlantic City last weekend. I'm the only one who came out ahead. Now none of them want to talk to me."

"Maybe we're both ghosts and it hasn't sunk in yet." He stood up. "Better get to those shoes while the place is still open."

"Okay dear. It's been very nice talking to you. Strange, but very nice." She fixed on him for a moment. "Mind if I say something before you go?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"Whatever it is, it can't be that bad. You're young. Give yourself, or whoever it is, half a chance. While you're here, buy yourself something. It always makes you feel better."

"Goodbye." He turned, his face flushed. *A busload of nomadic old people driving from horizon to horizon in search of bargains,* he concluded as he walked out into the freezing drizzle.

He ventured to drive through the underpass, parked, walked into Sweater World and walked out with ten sweaters.

As he drove the sun was setting. The glaring lights of a commercial strip beckoned. He took an exit and sat at a red light, scanning the horizon for a place to stop. The commercial strip flickered to life in the blue and red haze of dusk. Neon glowed, arrows blinked. Headlights flowed into a river of white, tail-lights a stream of red.

He checked into a chain motel. The man at the desk was pleasant, helpful and impersonal. Charles took the brochure and the card key the man offered.

In the room he threw down the case and the shopping bag, kicked off his shoes, pulled off the spread and dove at the bed. The television was huge. He couldn't see how they got it in through the door. He concluded that they had built the room around it. He found the remote and started flipping channels. The same necklaces the old woman in the burger place had worn were revolving on a velvet headless torso on the Teleshopping Channel. "Oh bargain nomads, wander no longer," he intoned. He switched to an old movie he had seen as a child. It was colorized. He got up, opened the panel under the screen and fiddled with the controls until it was black and white again. *They'll be colorizing film noir next. Then what will we call it?* he wondered.

He took off his clothes, except for the briefs and tried on the sweaters. Six of them fit. He placed these in a drawer. He stuffed the other four into the wastepaper basket and got under the covers. An after dinner mint slid from the next pillow and bounced



off his right nipple. He unwrapped the mint, ate it and tossed the bit of foil on top of the discarded sweaters.

When he woke up in the middle of the night, he was staring at the smiling, impish face of a guy who was selling videotapes that told you how to set up your own phone sex lines and place bogus ads in newspapers. Charles remembered ads that used to read: 'Thousand of overseas jobs! Send five dollars for listings.' He imagined falling for one of those ads, climbing on a private plane, being drugged on board and waking up in some twisted emir's male harem room, filled with hookahs, plump round sofas and fashion magazines. *That would be okay, he thought, but I'd draw the line at wearing a veil.*

On another channel several shabby-looking people who claimed they had gotten rich from real estate sat before a Hawaiian backdrop. On the next, Dionne was gargling her psychic pitch.

He got up and took a plastic cylinder out of his leather case. He padded to the bathroom, uncapped the pills, dumped them into the bowl and flushed.

In the morning he drove to a shopping center diner for breakfast: pancakes with blueberry syrup, bacon, coffee and grapefruit juice. He read USA Today. There was a big color photo of the largest cucumber on earth -- grown with genes spliced in from watermelons and giant pandas. "It's all a plot by the pod people," he muttered to himself.

"What's that? Something else I can get you." The yellow-uniformed waitress beamed down, holding a pot of coffee.

"I guess more coffee."

She poured. "That's a pretty big cucumber there. Twice the size of the little girl next to it."

"I wonder what my psychiatrist would say about that picture." He looked at it again. "Probably nothing. He's not a Freudian."

She took a step back, tightening her grip on the handle of the glass beaker full of scalding brown fluid. "If there's anything more you want, just ask for it." Her smile held.

"Thanks. Just the check."

Charles stood in front of the ticket window, gazing at the movie schedule above. An even twenty films were showing. Under his breath, he added up the times and walked up to the window. A young man in a green shirt and black vest stared into his eyes. He asked for three tickets, felt the warm air on his hands as he put the money under the window. He pocketed the tickets, one pink, one orange, one red. The pink one was another comedy about a man and a woman with some cute heterosexual dilemma. The orange one was an animated feature about a porcupine from outer space. The red ticket promised plenty of blood, futuristic weaponry and pectoral muscles. Sitting in Cinema 9, holding a large popcorn and lemon-lime-like soda, Charles held his breath and waited for the familiar multiplex jingle with its warnings not to smoke, talk or throw

refuse about the theater. He paid close attention to the coming attractions.

Upon entering the mall he felt he was visiting a great cathedral, a place of holy pilgrimage. He went up to the ATM and withdrew his daily limit. Spending would be his sacrifice. All morning he scrutinized every store but could find nothing. At the bookstore he bought a post card depicting the mall on opening day, a stamp and a book, surprised to find an 'eighties gay novel in a mall bookstore.

He took a pen out of his woolen coat and scribbled on the postcard.

Dear George,

Having a good time. Wish I were elsewhere.

Love,

Charles

He licked the stamp, stuck it on, and placed the postcard in the book.

He bought a burrito and a drink, sat at one of the small round white metal tables set up for diners and read the book:

Jeremy lay still in the bed. Daniel opened the door slowly. Jeremy pretended to stir and sink back into the mattress.

"Cut it out, Jeremy. I know you're awake."

Turning, Jeremy sat up in bed, the soft stark white sheets falling casually around his slim torso, a torso that had of late felt no other caress. "Yes, I'm awake and you're late getting home again."

"I'm seeing another guy."

"That's a lie. Don't you think I'd know if you were seeing someone else? You were working late again. Don called and told me he left you at the office."

"I could have called you myself, at least."

"I'm not ready to have this discussion now. Not again."

"I thought it might be easier if I gave you a reason to leave me."

"It's no good." Jeremy felt himself wanting Daniel more than he ever had before, but not this Daniel. He wanted the Daniel he had met at a party and fallen in love with, the Daniel he had started to plan his life around.

Charles heard shrieks to his left and looked up. Three teenage girls were staring, giggling, not at him, but at the cover of his book: a hazy photo of a half-clad boy staring vacantly through blinds that etched horizontal bands across his nubile frame. The title glowed in saffron: SHADOW OF HIS LOVE.

*Nasty suburban spawn. Shouldn't they be locked away in school at this hour?* He hadn't thought to hide the book, as if the table were in a cafe on a side street in his neighborhood. He held the book jacket against the table, slurped a bit of his guava sorbet

shake and lowered his eyes to the page. He felt something soft hit his head. He reached up and felt around. He sensed the gooeyness of chewing gum. He pulled some of it out, but the gum formed long strands that fused quickly with curly locks of hair. The girls burst out in screams. He glared at them. He began to stand. The girls stopped.

"We better get out of here," one said. They pushed out their metal chairs and ran.

He grabbed the book, walked quickly to the men's room and faced the mirror. In the fluorescent glare he saw he was breaking out. "Must be the fast food. Like a teenager again, except for the lines. Think anyone will notice the green gum?" He waited a second. "I'm not getting an answer. I guess it's a good sign." He got as much of the gum out as he could using a comb, then wrapped the comb with toilet paper from the big rolls in the stalls. As always, the hand dryer was situated too high on the wall. As he held his hands up to be scorched by the machine, water dripped to his elbows.

Charles had been through two multiplex cinemas, seeing four or five movies a day. A week was gone. It took the credit card charges about that long to show up in the records. Unseen hands would pay the bills, but he had to get on the move. He switched rental cars and headed away from the strip, stopping only to mail the postcard to George.

He thought he would try a different state. He drove north, then east to Connecticut. Other than the names on the road signs, however, little changed. The Drive-Inn Motel looked like a good bet. He checked in at the drive-through window. He liked that. He decided to minimize human contact by getting window service or take-out food and eating in the car or in his room.

It was raining heavily. He unpacked and ordered in from the motel's restaurant. He tuned in some pay per view movies. By one a.m. he felt he couldn't sleep, so he punched up a straight porn movie and tried to jerk off. As with much straight porn, he found the men unattractive, even repellant. He gave up and went to sleep, exhausted and unsatisfied.

The next day the downpour continued. He stayed in the room and finished Shadow of His Love. Jeremy had found Darren, a man even prettier and more insipid than himself. He broke up with Daniel, who somehow came to a bad end by drowning in freshly poured cement:

And as he struggled to free himself the name 'Jeremy' formed on his lips, soon to be frozen for all time.

Charles tossed the book in the wastepaper basket and channel-flipped himself to sleep another night.

After three days he noticed that he was running out of new movies. He hoped the studios would release the next batch soon. He studied the E! Channel carefully for release dates.

Seven days later, at five in the morning the phone rang. He tried to ignore it. He put a pillow over it. After twenty-eight rings, he broke down and picked up the receiver.

"Charles Briarcliff?"

"Who wants to know?"

"My name's Oliver Portley. Your parents hired me to find you."

"You've found me. I guess you can go home now."

"You know I can't do that, Charles. Why don't you come meet me?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm at a pay phone about a mile and a half east, in the Blue Azalea Diner. I drove up to the desk of your motel and asked some questions. When they figured out I was an investigator, they told me to get lost. Said they didn't want any trouble."

"I've got to get some clothes on. Give me twenty minutes."

"I'll give you fifteen."

Charles stuffed everything into the leather case and ran to the car. He got in, pulled up to the window, signed his bill and hit the gas.

Twin beams flashed in the rear-view mirror. "He was on his car phone! Sneaky bastard!" he shouted to the air. He crossed six lanes of moving traffic against the light. The headlights stayed

with him. He crawled up the on-ramp. "Goddam rent-a-car." Pulling out on the highway, he knew he didn't have a chance. "What is he going to do, run me off the road?"

The first light of the day was turning the eastern edge of the sky cobalt. He screamed down the highway, zig-zagging across empty lanes. A sharp curve came up. He slowed to take it. The other car passed his, then spun around hard to face him. Bolts of electric blue strafed the embankment. A siren wailed. Charles swerved. In the rear-view mirror he could see Portley being handcuffed by the state police.

Charles howled and kept going at the speed limit. Twenty miles away he felt edgy. *What if Oliver Portley shows his private ID and gets the cops involved in this?*

In the valley below he saw his refuge. A crumbling, pink paint-peeling monstrosity of a building. He swung out on the exit and pulled up.

The Irongate Inn in Helmsford looked like a place Charles wouldn't be caught dead in -- a good place to hide if they were looking. The desk clerk was watching tv. *Good looking kid*, he thought. He stared into the man's eyes, dark gray. His dirty blonde scraggly hair was tied in back. He wore a work shirt and jeans that appeared unintentionally ripped. The nameplate on the desk said: "Rick Harglove, Manager."

"One night?"

Charles took out his card. "Maybe three or four."

"Aren't you sure?"



"Why? Is a convention hitting town?"

"Yeah, and the Rustgate Inn is booked solid next week."

"Not much love for the place?"

"Can't wait to get the hell out of this town."

"Too old to join the army?"

"I'm on probation. Crashed my car into a hardware store. Fell asleep at the wheel because I was working all the time. They said it was reckless endangerment or something. Hell, it was three in the morning. No one on the street. I got off with some community service. Can't drive for another year, then I'm still on probation another two."

"Who drives you around?"

"My girlfriend, when she can. Most of the time I ride my damn bicycle."

"In the snow?"

"In whatever. Can't operate anything with a motor for a year, and that's what I used to do -- road construction."

"I see, heavy equipment."

"Yeah. That's why I'm at this dump. You sure you want to stay here? Mostly we get the ladies, you know, and the men running around on their wives, and teenagers. That's how I got to know the owner. Used to come here 'cause I had to."

"As long as you change the sheets."

"Every month." Rick smiled. Charles found him refreshingly down-to-earth. This was real, native charm.

"Mind if I ask you something, uh, Rick?"

"Go ahead, ask."

"I'm looking at real estate in the area and I want to get a good picture of what it's really like around here. I need someone to show me the local points of interest. Would you go for a drive with me sometime while I'm here?"

"Right. Those people who take you around to houses will tell you anything to get you to buy. Tomorrow afternoon okay?"

"Sure, I've got some time."

"Turn left up here, and a quarter mile down take the dirt road right."

"It's a maze. You *will* help me get out of here, right Rick?"

For more than a mile they followed a twisting road carpeted with pine needles and fallen leaves. Charles worried out loud. "I might get stuck in a real rut this time."

"Right through this bunch of trees and we're there."

Charles pulled the car out onto a flat place along the meander of a river walled on all sides by thick trees.

"Almost impossible to get to."

"The river made this beach. No one dumped sand here or anything."

"It's like a place that hasn't changed since the ice age. Completely secluded. An oasis in the desert of civilization."

"That's just it. It's too cold now, but in the summer, you know, people swim nude here."

"I like that. You want to try it?"

"No, man it's too cold. The water would make my balls shrink up."

"Can't have that. I could turn the car heater on, and we could get naked anyway."

"I knew you had something on your mind." He grabbed the back of Charles' head and pulled his face to his jeans. "Try and open my fly with your teeth. I like that." Charles nibbled at the zipper. "Man, you know your hair's got these sticky green gobs in it?"

Charles stayed on at the Irongate for a couple of weeks. He went to the movies as usual, but returned by midnight to await Rick's nightly rounds. He was getting to like the taste of metal.

He awoke one evening and opened the door to face another twilight. Oliver Portley loomed large, blocking his exit.

"Charles Briarcliff?"

"Oh, you again. What, no trench coat?"

"You want to come with me?"

"No. Do I have a choice?"

"No."

"Can you wait outside while I pack?"

"Not a chance."

"I'll have to follow you in the car. I've got to return it."

"Grab anything you have in the car. I'll take care of it later. And don't forget to check out. You don't want to leave without saying goodbye."

"Where are we going?"

"Your apartment. Your boyfriend," he said the word with a trace of contempt, "is waiting to take over."

"With my parents and my shrink, right?"

"You'll get to see them later. They didn't want to come down too hard on you." He creased his brow. "You've done this kind of thing before."

"Didn't they tell you? Of course not. Family secrets."

"Mind if I ask you one thing?"

"You're going to ask 'Why?'"

"Yeah."

"Which answer would you like: 'I'm running away from my life' or 'If I knew why, I wouldn't do it'?"

"What about the truth? Come on. Give me something more to tell your folks. You know what you've put them through?"

"Do you know what they put me through?"

"Hey, I don't know you, but I'd say you're a goddam spoiled brat who's getting too old for this game. You think you didn't get enough attention or love or something. Not from your parents, not from your boyfriend. So you wreck your life just to get back at them."

"What do you want, a blow job for finding me? Or two to make you lose me again."

"No thanks. It's not what I'm into. Besides, you look like hell right now."

"Thanks. You're not my type anyway."

"You want to get away from your problems? Why don't you move?"

"I tried that once."

"Next time you might not be so lucky."

"Lucky?"

"You might run into the wrong character in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Is that in the detective's handbook? Do they train you to tell people what they already know?"

"Take the manager here. Ran a check on him while I was waiting for you to come out, just for laughs. He's out on probation. Driving drunk at noon down the main street of town, hit a man and nearly killed him. That was after the usual string of barroom brawls and simple assaults. He likes to beat people up, you know."

"I - uh. I'm surprised they trust him to look after guests."

Portley laughed. "In this place knocking people around is part of the job. Let's get you back home."

"Is there a bonus for safe delivery?"

"Yeah."

"And if you had found me dead in the woods somewhere?"

"Half-price. It might have been worth it just for the amusement. Anyway, I'm all out of curiosity. You're just a crate of apples or oranges I've got to drop off."

"I'm just some fruit to you, then?"

"And I'm just another dick." Charles laughed.

Oliver Portley brought Charles to the door and rang the bell.

"I won't say goodbye."

"No. Let's make this moment last."

The door opened. A gaunt shadow framed in the door, George stood silent.

"Here he is. Safe and sound."

"Thank you," he said dismissively.

"Don't mention it." The detective called, stepping into the elevator.

Charles stepped in. He dropped his bag on the floor.

"That was a pretty long breakfast." George put his arm around Charles' waist and held him tightly.

"Service is getting slower and slower." Charles pulled himself away and sprawled across the sofa.

"Great postcard. Very reassuring."

"You know I'm not much of a letter-writer."

"You want tea or something?"

"Tea, fine." He looked around. "You know, the apartment looks different."

"I moved some things out."

"Oh."

"I'm staying with Paul. He has that extra room. That's until I get my own place. Then I'll take the rest of it."

"Oh, yeah. Of course."

"Unless you want me to put them in storage?"

"No. Keep it all here as long as you want."

"You want me to stay with you while you get back to reality?  
I told your parents two weeks."

"I didn't know that you were breaking up with my parents."

"All right, I'm telling you. Two weeks, if I can stand it.  
And I'm not breaking up with you; I just need some time."

"Don't spare me, George."

"Charles. I just wanted you to come back. You'd gone missing  
long before you walked through that door. It doesn't matter now.  
I just want to make sure you're okay, then get the hell."

"I don't know what to say. I guess I expected a fight."

"Sorry. You want fireworks, Chinatown's south and east about  
fifteen blocks. Oh, your job wants you back. They say if you want  
some short-term psychiatric in-patient care, you're covered for  
it."

"Check myself in somewhere? Do people really do that these  
days?"

"Consider it, anyway. Talk it over with Earnie. You've got  
an appointment with him tomorrow at nine, and every day for the  
next two weeks. I will walk you there, and I will walk you home."

"House arrest?"

Charles turned around and started. George was standing over  
him, holding a pair of open scissors. "And hand over your credit  
cards. Now!"

Charles sat in the overstuffed worn corduroy chair that faced  
his psychiatrist.

"Earnie, you've shaved off your beard," Charles said.

"Like it, Charles?"

"You look ten years younger."

"I was afraid of that. My secretary is threatening to start taking me out to the clubs. I told him 'no' quite emphatically. No one will take me seriously looking like this."

"You mean you're not here to entertain me? I thought we were going to sing some songs."

"Let's get down to business. We've got to go over your adventures in alienation together: what new things you've learned, what experiences you've had."

"I'm not sure I want to."

"We'll start slowly at first. You know, you're one of my favorite counselees. I think I'm almost ready to write you up. You've got a real streak of post-modernist daring about you. Imagine it! Motels, malls, movies, fast food and slow rental cars. It's as if you've reduced life to the raw essentials our consumer culture says you need to survive. Life stripped of all community, all human interaction at any level deeper than the exchange of money for services."

"Have you thought that perhaps I'm just another depressive zombie walking the earth?"

"Come now, you don't give yourself enough credit for the creative uses you find for your depression."

"I thought I was just being more useless than usual."



"Try thinking about it. In your very attempt to nullify your existence you prove just how connected to everyone you are. The disappearances, the forced rescues are part of your life's canvas. Everyone in your life, all the people you think don't give a damn about you suddenly *have to*."

"George is moving out. He says he'll stay two weeks if I want him to."

"I'm sure you're conflicted over that. It's a strong statement when someone you love withdraws his co-dependent support. You will have to respect his choice to do that."

"I guess it'll be good for him."

"We'll go over the break-up next time."

"Next time."

"Meanwhile, maybe it's time you went out and had a lot of meaningless sex; safely, of course."

"You mean -?"

"Why not? Since you're not ready to replace George, go see who's out there. Sometimes the only way to connect with other people is at the most superficial level possible."

"I read a book like that a couple weeks ago."

"We'll talk about that Thursday. For now, I'm giving you some Inhibitol for anxiety attacks. And don't go off the anti-depressives again, I'm warning you. Now, if you have any sudden impulses of the wrong sort, beep me."

"You don't think I should go away and take myself out of circulation for a while?"

"Charles, you've already done that. Now it's time to apply your new-found knowledge."

"I don't think I have any, but I'll try."

"Don't try, do!"

"Thanks, Earnie."

"Don't mention it."

"I won't if you won't."