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## THE MOUNTAIN AND THE NIGHT

by Jesse Dykstra

At 7:16 P.M. on December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2005, darkness had fallen. Paramount's private, employee-only holiday party was underway on the New York backlot, a conglomeration of 46 facades which stood on the northwestern edge of the 65-acre studio lot. This was a lavish holiday party, even for Los Angeles. Most attendees would never see a bigger, more expensively produced party in their lifetime. A no-guest policy had been implemented.

Near the entrance to the backlot, Paramount employees converged purposefully and almost giddily on the long red carpet that lead into the party. They were welcomed by four just-out-of-graduate-school pages, who stood flanking the carpet, in mannish, studio-issued, matching uniforms: a pair of pleated khaki pants, a navy-blue blazer over a white Oxford button-down shirt, paired with a blue necktie with small white stars embroidered on it.

The pages distributed pink paper drink tickets, three to a person, along with printed maps of the party. Yes, the party was so expansive a map was helpful. Behind them, the backlot glowed grandly as Hall & Oates' "Private Eyes" poured out from a soundstage somewhere. The guests eagerly waited to receive their tickets from the pages. The first, Nick Kalgren, was a hauntingly handsome 25-year-old NYU grad with fair skin, striking black eyebrows and thick, almost-combed black hair. Last month in the pouring rain, sitting behind the steering wheel of a blue eight-passenger tour cart crammed full of tourists, water dripping off the vehicle's thin plastic roof, Nick had

pointed out the undressed, vacant backlot, newly rebuilt after a fire destroyed nearly everything, and the original tall gray cement wall that bordered the Hollywood Forever Cemetery where one could visit the graves of several former Paramount employees including Rudolph Valentino, Cecil B. DeMille and Douglas Fairbanks. And there was Bugsy Siegel, too, the handsome, blue-eyed, Brooklyn-born mobster known as one of the most infamous and feared gangsters of his day. As a boy, Siegel committed thefts on the Lower East Side before amassing a criminal record that included armed robbery, rape and murder, and by age 21, he was a successful bootlegger, wearing fashionable gray double-breasted pinstripe suits, a cool pair of half-framed sunglasses with slightly pointed ends, a gold pinky ring on his left hand as he participated in the night life of New York City, a horrible guy Nick admitted, a womanizer and recruiter of gang bosses who also threw lavish parties for movie stars and studio executives at his Beverly Hills home in the 1940s.

Carter Embry, the second page, was a short, bearded 25-year-old out of USC who, just yesterday morning, had stood inside a brightly lit Stage 29 monitoring a crowd from the top of a stairway on an elevated seating area, the audience members silently watching a live taping of CBS's daytime talk show "Dr. Phil."

The third page, Dave Moser, was a tall, lean, 26-year-old Princeton alum with quick eyes who, for three weeks, under harsh fluorescent light, had occupied the second-assistant desk of a demanding executive in the Administration Building.

Finally, there was Brooke Danby, a delicate-looking 25 year-old with orange-gold hair and an MFA from AFI who, this very afternoon, had lead a private walking tour with a Chinese billionaire, the pair walking along Avenue C, Brooke mentioning RKO and Desilu Studios, and yes, how Lucille Ball's wardrobe stylist died, right there, right over there on Stage 23.

The pages understood - as the great page-turned-executive A.C. Lyles did before them - that if they performed their jobs well, if they were great rememberers, the studio's whiteboard of history would not be forgotten or erased. And so here they stood, Dave, Carter and Brooke in mid-rapid-fire-conversation, Nick mutely taking in the scene. There was an unmistakable sad aloneness about Nick, yet his red-rimmed eyes were not from

crying but rather from chronic insomnia, and because he was young, it left him with an appearance that was at once sexily fatigued and modelish.

“... Guys. Guys, look at me. Time travel is possible. That’s all I mean,” Dave insisted.

“What, so where ya gonna go, Dave?” Brooke asked. “Say hi to the Mayans?”

“No. No, seriously - You take a frequent flier, right. He crosses the Atlantic each week for, like, forty years. Guy actually travels one one-thousandth of a second into the future - proven fact!”

“Dave. Dave,” Brooke whispered. “Why are you shouting?”

“And you know this - how?” Carter asked Dave.

“Einstein's theory of special relativity. Confirmed by experiments, so,” Dave told him.

Carter glanced from Dave to Brooke theatrically, mimed disapproval and alarm.

“Oh, Einstein now,” he mocked. “Whoa whoa, people. Whoa whoa.”

“Could you maybe just - Listen up,” Dave pleaded. “Whenever something moves relative to Earth, its time runs more slowly than stationary clocks, okay, so it ends up moving into Earth's future. And keep in mind, Einstein said the closer an object gets to the speed a light, the further it moves through time. Okay? You follow me so far?”

“Examples, Dave. Examples,” Carter suggested.

“Huh? Okay. Like for example, traveling at, like, ninety-nine percent the speed a light for three years would take you... ‘bout seventeen years into the future. Think about that.”

Carter turned his head, broke the conversation to watch as uniformed security officers stood shoulder to shoulder, just beyond the pages, at the end of the red carpet, verifying employee badges. Behind the officers, just inside the party, artificial snow fell on three beautiful, buxom women in tiny red fur-trimmed Mrs. Santa Claus dresses, the trio caroling joyously to passerby.

“Jesus. Wow,” Carter remarked distractedly, eyeing the women before turning back. “Sorry. It’s just, Dave, you know, I have a very skeptical view of time travel, to put it mildly. Always have.”

“Really? And why’s that, Carter?”

Carter paused, thought a bit as employees continued to trickle down the red carpet.

“I - ‘Cause o’ George Eliot,” he continued. “‘Cause George Eliot said the trouble with fantasy fiction is that it’s just too easy, that’s why.”

Dave nodded his head in a way that didn’t suggest agreement.

“Just - that’s - just, what does that even mean?” he asked.

“Means you can do anything,” Carter declared, in a voice full of calm certainty. “You make your own rules. It’s just a ‘What if?’ question. What if hackers could be heroes... in a future dominated by computers? What if astronauts crash-landed on a planet with talking apes? I mean, c’mon. Pfft.”

“Okay...” Dave said. “But I’m talking about science here, not science fiction.”

“So, so, real quickly, then - where’s the line?” Carter asked. “What’s science and what’s fiction? Or is it all just fictionalized nonfiction?”

“Fictionalized nonfiction?” Dave repeated with disdain.

“I mean, no, no, look at Hal Clement. Look at Arthur C. Clark and Stephen Baxter and all those guys. That’s hard science, man. That’s playin’ with facts.”

“You mean *factual dexterity*, right? And those are authors, right? Authors?”

“You’re an idiot,” Carter muttered. “C’mon.”

“Okay, yeah yeah yeah, okay,” Brooke said quickly. “But what about *Back to the Future*?”

“Okay, *Back to the Future*,” Carter replied. “You can’t just set your destination and press ‘go.’ Surprise, surprise - that’s impossible.”

“Let’s try it. Let’s do it.”

“No. We’re not trying it.”

“We’ve gotta test it somewhere.” Brooke swept a hand over the backlot. “So I’m thinkin’: Well, if we do it in the backlot - eighty-eight miles an hour! We do it, we fly!”

“No,” Carter told her. “It’s not like you take a DeLorean, pop in your destination and just materialize elsewhere in time, Brooke. That’s not how it works.”

“I was joking, Carter. *Joking*.”

“And I was proving Dave wrong. He is wrong.”

“No, dude,” Dave pointed out, cocking his head defensively. “I mean, I mean, you’re proving my point, man. The real time machines of relativity don’t work this way. You don’t dematerialize and reappear - you travel through time and space to your destination.”

“Uhhh. Pause. Question.” Brooke blinked. “Sooo, alright, so - what about eighty-eight miles an hour?”

“You gotta be movin’ a lot faster than eighty-eight miles an hour,” Dave conceded. “The question is, Can you go fast enough?”

“Wait wait wait, hold on, hold on,” Brook said. “So what about chaos? Chaos’ll happen if you stop your parents’ birth, right? You know that one, don’t’chu?”

“But Brooke, it’s like this,” Dave explained. “It’s not like the trip is impossible, okay. It’s just that you’d end up somewhere else. You’d end up in some parallel universe.”

“This is so funny to me,” Carter observed. “He studies the universe now - how did *that* happen?”

“Read a book, dude,” Dave told him, shaking his head, deadpan.

“And that’s granite credibility?”

“And what, then?” Brooke asked. “We time travel now? Go back and forth?”

“No, well, see - that - that’s the other thing,” Dave said. “It doesn’t work the same backward and forward, but... yeah.”

“So this is a known thing?” Carter asked, rubbing his eyes with thumb and forefinger. “The ‘backward and forward?’”

Dave winced slightly, took a deep breath.

“Brooke,” he said. “See, the thing is, though, in *Back to the Future*, the DeLorean jumps forward and backward, the same way. It’s kinda easy. But with Einstein’s theory, you make a time machine with his theory, there’s no ‘return’ button, right, ‘cause it’s takin’ us only to the future. *Just* the future.”

“Okay,” Carter groaned. “Yeah, well, y’know y’know, Klosterman said traveling to the future is just a fantasy of not having to learn *anything*. Not having to go through *anything*. So it’s basically laziness and fear, am I right?”

“So now you’re talkin’ about Klosterman,” Dave said. “I’m talkin’ Einstein and you’re talkin’ Klosterman.”

“That’s right,” agreed Carter. “That’s correct.”

“Well... I think you’re overinterpreting.”

“Anything else, Dave? Anything else on Einstein?” Carter asked.

Dave handed three drink tickets to a middle-aged man, youthfully dressed in a slim-fitting DSquared2 polo shirt and white Neil Barrett jeans.

“Carter, actually. Actually, I do,” Dave continued. “He also, okay, he also talked about the effects of gravity on space and time, how these, um, these, um... massive bodies warp time itself. ‘Cause sometimes I think – I think you don’t need a DeLorean. A machine. Like, maybe it’s more natural. Like, a natural warp. And things jump through ‘cause the warp creates overlap. And all of a sudden, the past is here. It’s here. And it’s natural time travel. Like, for a second or two.”

“What, like a ghost?” Brook asked jokingly.

“Yeah, like a ghost. Like a ghost who’s alive, who’s actually alive, right now, here, *today*, and also, like, 1890, right? For a fleeting moment, right? For a fleeting moment, y’know, but I’ll stop right there...”

“Oh, thank you, Jesus. Oh. My. God,” Carter snapped too loudly.

Brooke released a huge snorting laugh at Carter’s outburst. She covered her face with her hands for a moment and let her hair fall down in front.

A slight grin inched across Nick’s face.

Carter shook his head reproachfully and couldn’t resist a laugh through his nose.

Finally Dave held his hands up in reluctant surrender, a truth-teller silenced by peer pressure.

And Brooke chuckled as she stole a glance at Nick, a coy grin crossing her face, the breeze touching her golden, flyaway hair.

It was 9:21 P.M., and inside the Guest Relations office in Bunglow 24, Carter, Dave, Brooke and Nick were changing hurriedly into party clothes, their work completed for the day.

Nick pulled on a well-worn black T-shirt, exposing the dark sleeves of tattoos on his forearms. He looked over to Brooke, who was pulling on a pair of dark skinny jeans over thin cobalt-colored lace panties. Brooke paused, looked up and found Nick returning her gaze, their eyes steady on each other, impassive. And Brooke kept her eyes on him as she slowly eased up the zipper on her jeans, Norman Greenbaum's "Spirit in the Sky" coming from the backlot somewhere.

Moments later, the backlot was a winter wonderland, buzzing with festive energy: a continuous sprinkle of artificial snow fell from the roofs of the facades, down past the glowing, back-lit windows rimmed with faux frost and the buzzing neon signs of "Greenwich Village," "Washington Square," "SoHo," the "Financial District" the "Upper East Side," the "Lower East Side" and "Brooklyn." "Spirit in the Sky" reverberated among the city of fake fronts with signs advertising businesses with names such as Dinosaur Plant toy store, P.F. Buyers ("gold, diamonds, coins - highest prices paid") and The Village hotel. Scattered throughout the backlot were nine well-stocked, black-clothed bars, a large ice-skating rink, an elevated sledding run with artificial snow, a pair of erected stages with live musical performances and 13 food stations with bay shrimp, sevruga caviar and sliced tenderloin, among other options, all free. There was a mindless pull of sex everywhere, the employees loose and laughing, whispering in ears and squeezing shoulders comradely, ambling the clogged streets in various stages of consumption.

Steam rose from manhole covers as Carter, Dave, Brooke and Nick moved through the party, eagerly walking the sidewalk along the broad Avenue H, drinks and maps in hand as they passed lampposts strung with plastic evergreen wreaths and artificial curbside trees, their leafless, frosted white branches strung with white Christmas lights.

A minute later, inside stage 16, Carter, Dave, Brooke and Nick moved down a wide hallway, draped in transparent white silk, the sound of pulsing dance music growing

louder as they reached the entrance, where they looked about in wonder: a long, airy soundstage with a high ceiling had been transformed into a nightclub ablaze in white light, opulently chic and decorated in near-all-white, creating a shiny, clean, futuristic interior, completed with dozens of modern, low-slung, white leather sofas, a pair of sleek white ball chairs, four large film reels sculpted of ice and eight massive, two-tiered white chocolate fountains with trays of marshmallows and strawberries, sitting atop white linen-clothed tables. The space was filled with the dreamy energy of youth: 200 Paramount employees moved about, alive to the moment, the crowd skewing young with a predictably large contingent of employees classified as assistants. At the eastern side of the stage, the pop music was rich and booming. Employees shimmied and head-bobbed on a slate white dance floor as a DJ spun music while he danced with lithe, tight movements.

At the entrance, Nick looked to the three-story swaths of hanging white linen that ringed a large rotating, circular bar, where eight white-clad bartenders efficiently mixed cocktails and poured Vilmart “Cuvée Grand Cellier” Brut Champagne.

It was 11:13 P.M., and Nick and Brooke stood chatting on the rotating bar, cocktails in hand, their fourth. There was nothing made-up about Brooke’s startling good looks. She wore little makeup around her long-lashed blue eyes and pillowy lips, her small natural breasts outlined beneath the cotton of her simple shirt.

Brooke de-pocketed a wad of 20-30 drink tickets, held them up before Nick.

“Y’know, sometimes you just want a little... luxurious absence in your head, wouldn’t’cha say?” she ventured. “You ever feel that?”

No answer. Brooke nodded toward the bartenders behind her.

“Open bar, though,” she persisted. “Not askin’ for ‘em, anyway. The tickets?”

Again, no answer. Nick just calmly stared at her, sipped his drink.

Brooke smiled, indicated her own face. “Hey - don’t worry, Nick. It’s not lust, here - it’s just... hopeful curiosity.”

“‘Hopeful curiosity’...” Nick replied finally. “Is that right?”

Brooke pocketed the tickets and leaned over, piqued by his mystery.

“It might be,” she said. “But being wanted is boring, okay. *Being tested?* Now that’s interesting.”

“I think so... I think you’re right.”

Brooke shook her head minimally and laughed silently: this guy just wouldn’t open up. So she dropped her smile and blinked softly, her expression turning serious.

“No, you think I smile so often I forget what I’m smiling about.”

“... But you’re not smiling,” he informed her.

Brooke looked at her drink for a second or two, then looked up to him, direct.

“No. I’m going dancing,” she announced.

And Brooke stared at him for a moment, then turned away to step off the rotating bar, unconsciously swaying her hips a little more than usual.

“Bye,” she said, without looking back.

Later, just off the dance floor, the white-clothed cocktail tables stood crowded with discarded bottles and glasses as The Killers’ “Mr. Brightside” blasted through speakers at a club-level volume. Inside raised cages, partially naked go-go dancers wearing micro-mini Catholic-schoolgirl skirts gyrated with libidinous abandon. On the dance floor below, employees were pressed shoulder to shoulder, sweating and dancing uninhibitedly and rubbing themselves up and down against each other, a few cocktails hoisted in the air. A youngish female executive in a silver J. Mendel sheath dress stood kissing a handsome, off-duty security officer, slow and serious, her arms draped around his neck, the pair making no effort to hide their affection.

Carter and Dave danced with a pair of sweet-faced female assistants, all four of them grinning and bobbing their heads in time to the music, their hair damp from exertion, their eyes glazed with alcohol.

Nick was dancing alone when he turned to find Brooke, squeezing out from a cluster of dancers, soundlessly mouthing along with the lyrics to “Mr. Brightside” as she approached him, her upraised arms swaying, her eyes locked on his face as she leaned in to be heard above the music, bringing her lips to his ear.

“Ow-owww,” she said quietly.

And she made a funny, rapturous face, causing Nick to smirk.

It was 12:22 A.M., and in the New York backlot, the party was at its apogee, the sky overhead pulsing with light, the Cars' "Magic" throbbing up and down the streets, from an erected stage at one end of the backlot –

*“Summer, it turns me upside down...*

*I see you under the midnight...*

*Got a hold on you, that's right...*

*Oh-oh, it's magic...”*

Brooke lead Nick by the hand through the “Brooklyn” streets, snow in her eyelashes, the pair approaching a faux-age-faded black, three-story building. The words “Four Creatures bookstore - open 9:00 A.M. - 11:00 P.M.” were marked in red plastic changeable letters, in an old-fashioned arch upon the glass entrance door.

*Jing jinnng*, Brooke pulled open the door, lead Nick into the facade, which lay dark and mostly empty. Moonlight fell through the windows onto a few empty water bottles littering the floor and a handful of broken tungsten lights and four-way barndoors standing collected in a corner. A single metal staircase lead up to each floor, where narrow metal catwalks ran clear around the walls, allowing technicians to backlight the windows.

Blurred, alcohol-loosened voices and laughter from unheard jokes seeped through the windows, the music shaking the walls as Brooke tugged Nick into the facade and abruptly gripped his upper arms, kissing him as they stumbled across the ground floor, passing tall steel beams, painted orange, their faces catching shafts of blue moonlight, Nick's back slamming against a wall, the pair locked together as Brooke took his hand and placed it on her crotch, rubbing it up and down, encouraging him as she closed her eyes blissfully and moaned softly and the music throbbed and throbbed and the walls shook and shook.

Minutes later, Nick slyly exited the facade alone, into the party, when something above him caught his eye. Nick turned, peered up to the facade from which he had come, to the second-story, southwest-facing, uncurtained window, where a ghost stood staring at him with malevolent intensity, a shimmering, jellyfish-like apparition of a handsome, blue-eyed man wearing a fashionable gray double-breasted pinstripe suit, a cool pair of half-framed sunglasses with slightly pointed ends and a gold pinky ring on his left hand, possibly from the 1940s.

Nick stared at the ghost, alert but expressionless.

Suddenly the ghost's face became too calm. Nick squinted, a realization dawning: this was Bugsy Siegel himself. Nick turned away and walked toward a nearby bar, Bugsy's eyes never leaving him as Simple Minds' "Don't You (Forget About Me)" drifted from speakers at one end of the backlot.

A figure glimpsed the private, employee-only party from above, a disembodied point of view, completely unknown, and then it soared up above the backlot and swept northward over a tall gray cement wall, and into the Hollywood Forever Cemetery.

As it floated above the shadowy old trees, their branches groaning ominously in the breeze, it moved over the paths that snaked through the cemetery, around the small pond and the mausoleums and the neat rows of headstones, hundreds of names carved into black, gray and maroon granite, some with wilted flowers at their base.

And it floated higher still, moving northwestward, finding the yellow glow from the crushing crowdedness of Hollywood. And it crossed over Sunset Boulevard and eight-story movie billboards and the blinking light atop the cylindrical Capitol Records tower that spelled out the word "Hollywood" in Morse code every few seconds, and it drifted northeastward, passing the Avalon nightclub and the Pantages theater and the Museum of Death and the Hollywood Tower apartments and the 101 coffee shop and the astonishing volume of cars flowing through streets, the parking attendants waving fluorescent wands, directing vehicles toward parking lots, and it floated higher still, into the darkened Hollywood Hills.

And there were wing lights of soaring jets above it as it moved up LedgeWood Drive, approaching the Hollywood Sign, the landmark illuminated by bolts of lightning

from the thundering, pre-stormy sky, the 45-foot-tall shiny white letters so highly polished a person might, for a fleeting, improbable moment, see his own reflection.

THE END