

Excerpt from *Everyone's Pretty*

Chapter the First

Introducing a Prince among men, a Holy Woman, and a sheep

Tuesday evening

10:11

Fat men were often powerful, that was true. Their girth did not appear unseemly, flanked by the pillars and arches of state. Thin men, however, were the revolutionaries and the seers. Che Guevara had not been a corpulent man, nor had Mahatma Gandhi. Also, the thin ones lived longer. Emaciation and longevity went hand in hand. For this reason Decetes had, from time to time, considered a regimen of starvation, but he was always too hungry. --Now I will starve, he would say, and his resolve would carry him from one day to the next. Then there would be his stomach, an abandoned child. He took pity on it.

Still, he knew the pride of self-restraint. A thin man was a lone wolf on the prowl.

Decetes applied himself to reading the graffiti on the toilet stall. He was an amateur archaeologist--or perhaps, since he rarely dug holes in the ground, merely an anthropologist. For he often studied mankind. Yes, he devoted him-self to their study, so he could better know them.

Know thine enemy, it was said.

I fucked yer sister, read one line. In another script beneath this, Go home Dad your drunk.

Decetes admired the homespun candor. It was here, above the rust-washed urinals, across the slate-gray metal doors of public bodily relief, that the psyche of the underclass found unfettered expression. The underclass was canny and astute. Decetes lauded their efforts.

He was hiding out in the restroom after a minor altercation with another bar patron, who had threatened him with injury. --Len, pour me another one, he had said. That was all. A not unreasonable request. --You've had enough, said Len. Len was not the garrulous, hearty bartender glorified by urban folklore. Len kept himself to himself. At times his surly furtiveness was irritating. Decetes had acquired the habit of poking at Len with the stick of his banter, trying to nudge him out of his hole.

But Len, like all burrowers, could dig himself quite deep beneath the surface. He had reached up for a bottle of Gordon's and poured a drink for someone else. Decetes had to follow his course to the end. --Len, you will pour me another one, or my army will roust your family from its home, rape the children and plunder the women. We will steal your valuables Len, and write with blood on the walls.

Sadly Len had no sense of humor. And Len had friends among the other regulars.

Decetes opened the restroom door slowly, eyed the exit sign and stealthily made his move, slinking low like a cat. Yes! He set off down the street in the dark. Houses started up: the block became residential not fifty steps away from The Quiet Man. Here was a well-lit house with people drinking on the front lawn. A fresh and gratis keg, wellspring of liquid truth? Possibly. He would investigate. Some of the people outside stood drinking from clear plastic cups: a favorable sign. A blond woman in a short-sleeved minidress chafed one bare arm with the other hand as he walked past. Scantly clad, the floozy! Bless her soul.

He would talk to her later, drink in hand.

He headed up the front walk, a placating smile to his right and to his left in case the host was present. He waved an eager hand, as though catching sight of a friend, and mounted the porch steps two at a time. There it was: the Grail, on the hardwood living-room floor. A man in a pink shirt stooped over its tin spout, cup tipped almost horizontal, manipulating the hose with a deftness familiar to Decetes. The keg was low. He had arrived in the nick of time. He removed a clean cup from the top of a pile.

--You would be? asked someone. He turned to face the interloper. It was a severe looking woman with glasses and short hair. Her long skirt bore a pattern of flying ducks.

--Dean Decetes, friend of John's, he said easily, and held out his hand for her to shake.

--...Ramon's friend? she asked. --I'm Darlene.

He was already at the spout.

--Nice place here, he said. Bent over the keg, he was at her waist level. The bulge of an abdomen constricted by cotton. Distracted by a shriek from the rear of the house, she passed him by. The ducks were flying south for the winter. Clutching his cup, heavy with tepid Miller Genuine Draft, he followed her back to the bedroom area, whence came the shriek that augured free entertainment. Where humbler men would have hedged and tiptoed, Decetes strode with

confidence. His gatecrashing skills had been honed through the lean years, and were now at their apex.

A porcine man stood at the bedroom door. He too was an onlooker. A cigarette drooped from his mouth.

--Bum a smoke? asked Decetes.

--All out, said the fat man, and retreated grunting.

Decetes peered into the bedroom. On a double bed a man lay on his stomach, with his pants around his knees. Darlene the duck lover bent over him and another woman hovered with her hands fluttering. Decetes ambled closer, taking a swig from his cup, and peered down. The man's bare buttocks were awash with blood. A gaping wound at the top of his crack was flowing freely.

--Vince what were you thinking? asked Darlene. --Surgery two days ago and he dances. Of course the suture's going to split.

She looked up.

--Stand back, said Decetes. --I'm an emergency medical technician.

Many guises wore the Holy One.

--What a coincidence! said the other woman. Her lipstick was smeared. --It's like hemorrhaging!

--Gotta ice pack? queried Decetes. Authoritative. --Put some ice on there. It's not serious.

--Let me check the freezer, said Darlene, on her way out the door. --Are just regular cubes okay?

--Ice is ice, lady, said Decetes with calm contempt. He didn't like the man's looks. His face was ashen and he had thick lips. It figured. He strolled in off the street and right up to a man's bloody rectum. It was the luck of the Irish, though Decetes was certainly no Mick.

He chuckled and gave the guy a rough pat to the shoulder. --You'll be fine, bud, he said.

--He had a cyst removed, said the woman with lipstick. --Benign, but it was causing him discomfort.

--They'll do that, said Decetes. --A cyst will do that. I'm no big fan of cysts. Personally, I can take 'em or leave 'em.

--You're an EMT? asked the bloody man. The side of his flabby face was pressed into the pillow. --Where'd you get your certification?

--UCLA Medical School, said Decetes. --Back in '83. Career change since then, but I still know my stuff.

--Hey. Are you even sober?

--Here we go, announced Darlene, bustling in with a handful of ice in a rag. --Hold tight there Vince. We're all here for you.

--Has that been sterilized, duck-lover? Decetes asked her sternly.

--Huh? No but it's clean, she protested. Decetes shook his head firmly.

--Uh uh uh, he intoned. --Paper towels are the way to go. She exited again.

--I didn't know they had EMT training courses at UCLA, said Vince.

--Learn something new every day, said Decetes. He had taken control, yet the beneficiary of his baronial goodwill was ungrateful. It was too frequently the case. Ingrates peopled the earth in obscene abundance. He quit the room, tapped the keg for a final few drops and went outside.

The blond floozy had a jacket draped over her shoulders. It had evidently been donated by the man shivering beside her in his T-shirt. Decetes approached them with a sure step; it was too sure. He tripped over a flagstone and toppled into the woman, spilling his beer on her chest and arm as they crashed to the ground.

--Christ, said the wimp in the T-shirt, extending a sallow hand to raise his pom-pom girl from the compacted turf. She was pinned beneath Decetes and he did not willingly relinquish his position. Through her thin dress he felt hillocks and valleys. It was a frontal paradise, a lush country.

Decetes was becoming aroused.

--Get off me, she ground out through clenched teeth, and pushed against his chest with her palms. Decetes dared to hope she had not noticed his tumescence.

--Sorry, I was stunned, he said, and raised himself onto all fours. The woman struggled from beneath him, scooting backward on the ground. He saw her legs. They were tanned and slim, though imperfectly shaven.

--Stunned? You had an erection!

--Madam, you presume. I am a man with high standards. That was my lighter you felt, said Decetes.

--Big goddamn lighter, she said, and picked grass off her arm. --Shaped like a mushroom.

--Alice, let's just go, said the 98-pound weakling, stooping to pick up his jacket.

--Jesus, said Alice, squinting at Decetes. --I know you.

--You know him?

--You're Bucella's brother, the one who was falling down drunk at Thanks--giving. I saw you fall onto a poker.

--Bucella is my sister, yes. But water is thicker than blood.

--I work with Bucella. Alice Reeve. This is Lonn.

She reached out to shake his hand, but he was patting his pockets as though for a business card. There were none in existence, of course.

--Dean Decetes.

--We're in AA, said Lonn stiffly. --I'm Alice's sponsor. I think you should consider joining us at the next meeting. On Wilshire, near Lincoln.

--Oh ho, oh ho, said Decetes, withdrawing his hand to raise it in protest. --Missionaries, zealots. Proselytists! Please leave me. I would be alone. Peddle your picture Bibles elsewhere. I am content to dance my heathen dances and sharpen my weapons on stones.

--One day you'll be ready, said Lonn.

--That'll be the day--hey--hey when I die, said Decetes. --I know your kind. You bring religion and you take away the wealth. You and your fellow pioneers are waging war upon my people, but for now I will hold out. I have my savage rapture and my ancestral lands. Goodnight sweet ladies. The keg has been duly drained. Me and my mushroom make our merry way home. Fungus, bungus, fungus. Hale fellows well met.

Four houses later, he positioned himself at the base of a dying jacaranda and unleashed himself upon the weeds. As he craned his neck to study the sky his trajectory altered, spraying porch, soil and doormat. Glancing back at the party on the lawn, he saw a bespectacled woman twirling shirtless on the sidewalk and regretted his early departure. But it was a barren waste there, breeding no Miller out of the dead land. And the lilacs could fuck off.

10:57

--That woman is troubled, said Lonn. --We should help her.

--I don't think it's really our business, said Alice. --Maybe she's just having a good time.

They watched as the woman, glasses askew on her face, flapped her arms and danced giddily on the pavement, a solitary dervish. Alice stared at the breasts, drooping pears slinging right and left. The woman had her eyes closed, and her mouth hung open.

--Babs, honey, come in now, rushed Darlene, coming down the front steps. --Honey, you need to rest. Come on in with big sister.

--I'm a streaker, squeaked Babs. --I'm a belly dancer!

--Come on now.

--I'm going to the little boys' room, said Lon, and followed them inside.

--Little boys' room?

Lon made her wince on a regular basis. He was the author of many wincing a day.

She sat down on a step and lit a cigarette, thinking of Bucella's drunken brother. He was a puffy vagabond, a staggering W.C. Fields rated XXX. Minus the dignity. But regardless of the source, insults bored beneath her skin and laid their eggs. She could never disregard a cruel word; for all she knew Bucella's drunken brother was an idiot savant. For all she knew he was right, she had turned into a sheep. Maybe she was walking in circles with her nose in a feedbag. Maybe one day she would drop from exhaustion; cloven hooves would flatten her fleecy carcass.

Guests chattered and nodded. There was the illusion of contact, but she was always untouched. They talked about one of two subjects: themselves or nothing at all. It had been years since people surprised her.

The end of routine, that would be the only surprise.

A laughing woman came out the front door, tapping Alice's back with a raised foot as she stumbled down the steps. --Oh that's so interesting! she squealed at the man behind her.

--What is interesting? What the fuck is interesting? said Alice, and crushed her Camel butt on the wooden porch as she stood. It fell between the slats, sparking. The woman giggled, the man shrugged whispering a word--bitch--as Alice walked past, and she was clear of them. The faces changed but not the quality of light beneath them, the dim flat light. And she was static too, like the rest, always a disappointment. She made light into silence.

Sobriety was like this: useless. What did you do to tempt yourself onward? Where was the carrot?

She walked away. Lon could wander the place looking for her; it would keep him busy.

At the corner of the street was a dive called The Quiet Man. Inside, in the dark, she could barely make out a pool table, a jukebox and a burly bearded man in leather vest and turbulent chest hair with a parrot on his shoulder. He was doing shots at the counter. She sat down two stools away and ordered a club soda.

--Jack the Sailor, ask Len for another Kamikaze, said the man with the parrot, and belched.

--Get this man a drink, squawked the parrot.

--Coming right up, said the barkeep.

--Good boy Jack the Sailor, said the man, and fed the parrot a peanut from his pocket.

--What else can he say, said Alice.

--Shut up Juanita, said the parrot. --You goddamn two-dollar Mexican whore.

--I see.

--Don't take it the wrong way, said Jack the Sailor's owner, stroking the feathered head. --He had a bad child-hood. The club soda's on me.

Alice smiled at him. He did not smile back, but he would smile soon.

She envied beehives and anthills. The glue of instinct kept them together; they did not lie alone in the dark.

11:39

Having rested for an interlude between a Dumpster and a fence, Decetes staggered toward his Pinto as sirens shrieked and a fire truck careered past, narrowly missing his foot. He took a swig from his half-empty fifth of Black Label, turned the key in the ignition and talked to himself as he drove. --Greater love hath no man than this, that he should lay down his wife for his friend.

Soon a black-and-white flashed its bawdy colors behind him. Decetes considered the options, which included a high-speed chase; but the time was not right. He pulled over and was subjected to an informal test. Toes, toes, wherefore art thou, unseemly digits? They were, sadly, beyond his reach. He was no longer the young and limber cavalier of former days. Black holes! The universe contracted like an angry sphincter.

He collapsed onto the street.

--Officer, he said when he was able to sit up, --this is not necessary. I'm way below the legal limit. One beer, that's it. My father was a member of the Temperance League. We are Mormons. To a man.

--Sir, your license has been suspended twice for this offense, said the cop.

Sir? The cop was clearly a rookie. Decetes saw him graduating from high school not two years ago, a mortarboard askew atop his pimpled brow, and decided to implement Plan A.

--Listen Officer, maybe you'll take an interest in my work. I'm a freelance editor, said Decetes. --Review movies for a national magazine. Fact you may be familiar with some of our publications.

The rookie let him bring out a copy from the backseat, but one look at the nudity inside and Decetes's ass was grass. The officer was a fundamentalist Christian of some stripe, clearly. Perhaps a Promise Keeper, even. Family values up the wazoo.

--We also publish a magazine for the law-enforcement community, fact I've done quite a lot of writing for it, started Decetes, reaching for the gun magazines spilled over the vinyl. But his hands were cuffed behind him in a trice. If he was not greatly mistaken they would be suspending his license for good.

In the squad car he attempted to draw the rookie out on the subject of value systems.

--Are you of the Pentecostal persuasion? he asked. --Your brother or father handle snakes? Snake-handling in the family? I handle one myself. Frequently.

--Shut up, please.

--Your sister speak in tongues? Glossalalia? My sister does. Once a month on the rag. I'm not kidding. Armenian, Swedish, what have you. Officer, I swear to the good Lord it's true. You should come over and hear her sometime. I can get you in free of charge.

--Shut up! snapped the rookie again, agitated. His radio was squawking out an emergency. He picked it up, spoke into it and spun the wheel.

--I have to take a leak, I'm going to mess up your upholstery here, said Decetes.

They pulled up behind two fire trucks. The house previously visited by Decetes was ablaze. A small crowd milled in the street; into the night air triumphant arcs of water spewed. Decetes was reminded of his needs.

--Don't leave me here Officer, he begged. --I'll piss on the seat. Leave the cuffs on, just let me take a leak. You think a man in my condition could get far? You have my license Officer.

--All right, just shut up I told you, said the rookie in a high-pitched voice, sweating profusely. He popped the back door open and ran toward the firefighters. Decetes opened his flies to the gutter, looked over his shoulder at the cop and then wended down a driveway and through someone's backyard.

The Pinto was elsewhere. He called home from a payphone.
--There's a possibility, he said, --the Los Angeles Police Department may have impounded my vehicle.
--Not again, you lowlife, said Bucella.
--Just pick me up, he said.
--Forget it, said Bucella. --I told you, the next DUI I do not bail you out.
--Wait, wait, said Decetes. --No bailing, no nothing. I'm here in my shirtsleeves on the side of the road.
--So what, said Bucella. --You have legs.
--I may meet with physical harm, said Decetes. --There are several potential assailants in the area. I mean here I am on a dark street with homeless individuals and African-Americans hooked on crack cocaine.
--You're a racist Dean, said Bucella.
--Racist, schmacist. I tell it like it is. This isn't Disney-land Bucella. Do you want to be responsible for my stabbing death? Here I am with a guy who I think may have a switchblade, Bucella. He smells like a 40-ounce. He's coming closer. Jesus. He's here! Oh help Bucella! Help!
--I'm sure you'll hit it off, said Bucella. --No means no. She hung up.
--Goddamn Bucella, said Decetes aloud. --Not worth the ribonuke--oxyribe--...DNA she's made of.
There was no one to hear him, since the street, which was well-lit by the orange glow on the horizon, housed no vagrants or addicts. He wrested a broken cigarette from his pocket, the cuffs chafing his wrists, and lit it. Pinching it tightly at the fissure, he started off in the direction of Santa Monica Boulevard, to catch a bus. But then he stopped in his tracks. Something had captured his attention. He stood swaying and gazed up at the firmament. Vast it was, but void of stars. Instead of celestial bodies the night sky was dappled with representations of his own face. How benevolent, how like a God! But how human. He was willing to admit it. A patriot and an American.
--A patriot, sir, and an American.
Let them come! His weapons were invisible but potent. His armaments were splendid. For he had what other men could only dream of having: a conscience clear as firewater.