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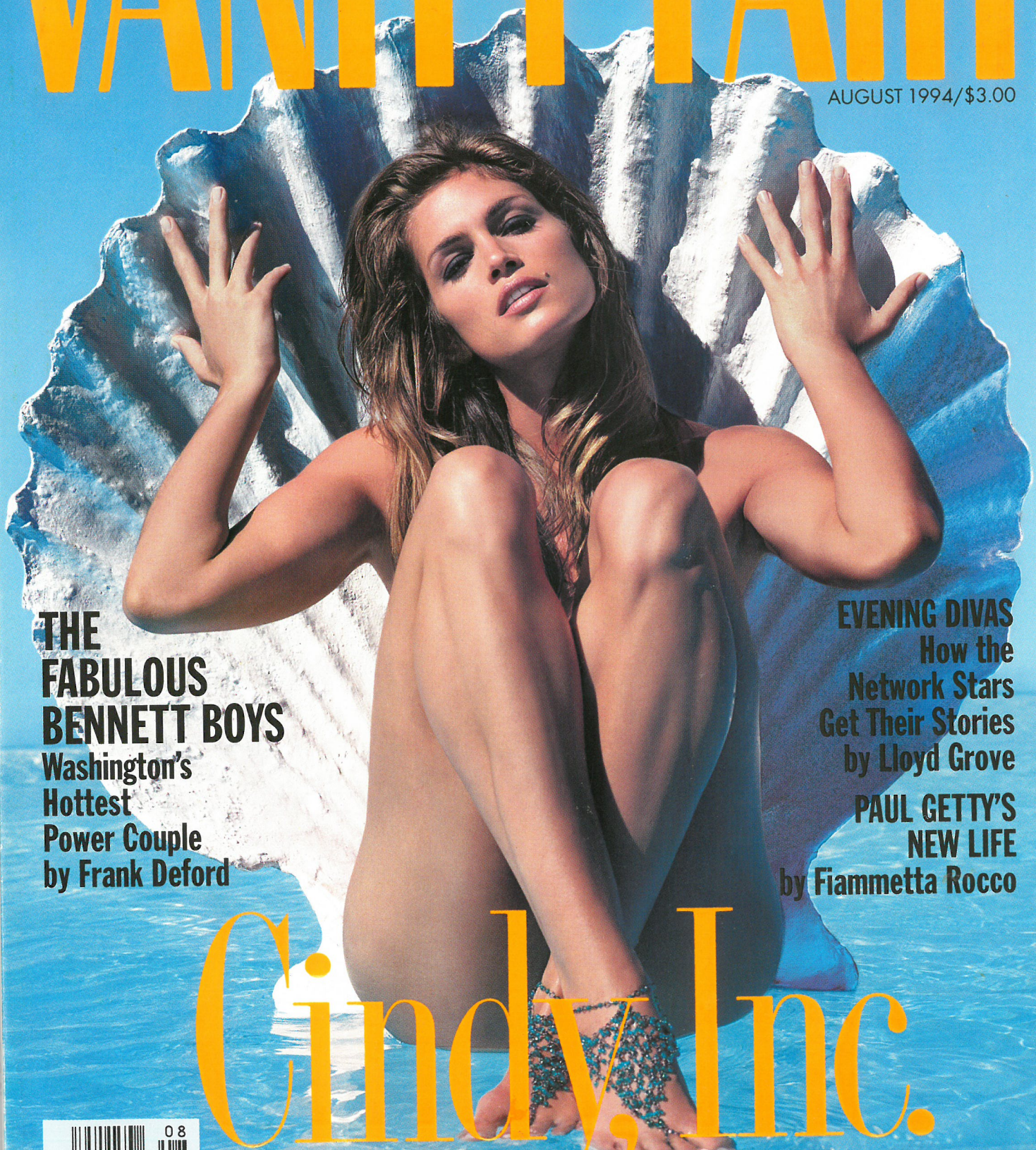

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Who's Afraid of Bret Easton Ellis?

At the tender age of 21, Bret Easton Ellis scored with *Less than Zero*, a best-selling novel of Hollywood kids too cool to care. Less than a decade later the icy violence of *American Psycho* made him a literary pariah. Now he's back, with *The Informers*, and, as MATTHEW TYRNAUER discovers, he's just itching to prove he's still dangerous

"Incredibly graphic. A nail-studded baseball bat. I was going to be raped with a nail-studded baseball bat. It was worse than a lot of stuff in *American Psycho*." Bret Easton Ellis is going over his death threats, the ultimate medallion in the New Age of Celebrity, where to be is to be famous. His voice is flat, uninflected, as he recalls the people who vowed to kill him when *American Psycho,* his tale of a saber-toothed yuppie's adventures in serial killing, slashed the limits of cutting satire in 1991.

Psycho was fiction-cum-sociopublicital happening that shocked the world of letters. Some with Madonna-inflamed imaginations suspected Ellis of engineering the whole thing, of using sex and murder to stir controversy and cash-generating publicity. Feminists and other constables of decency flung outrage. Simon & Schuster, Ellis's original house—which has since given the world Howard Stern's *Private Parts*—jumped ship, forgoing Ellis's $300,000 advance. At the tender age of 26, Bret Easton Ellis, who had charged onto the stage at 21 with the best-selling *Less than Zero,* was the most reviled writer in America, the Salman Rushdie of too much, too fast. Literary lions, tired of Ellis's partying and

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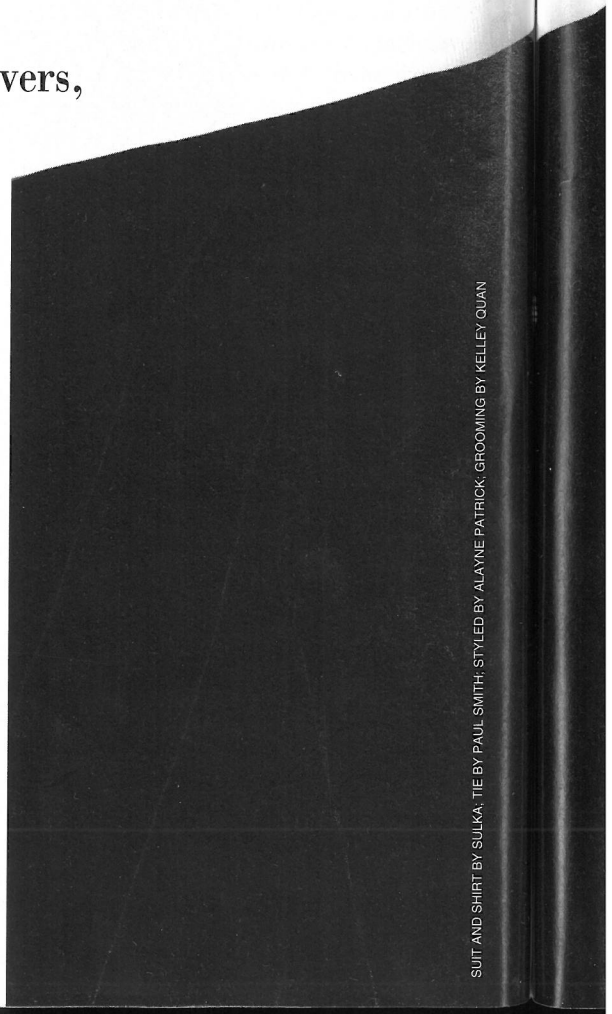
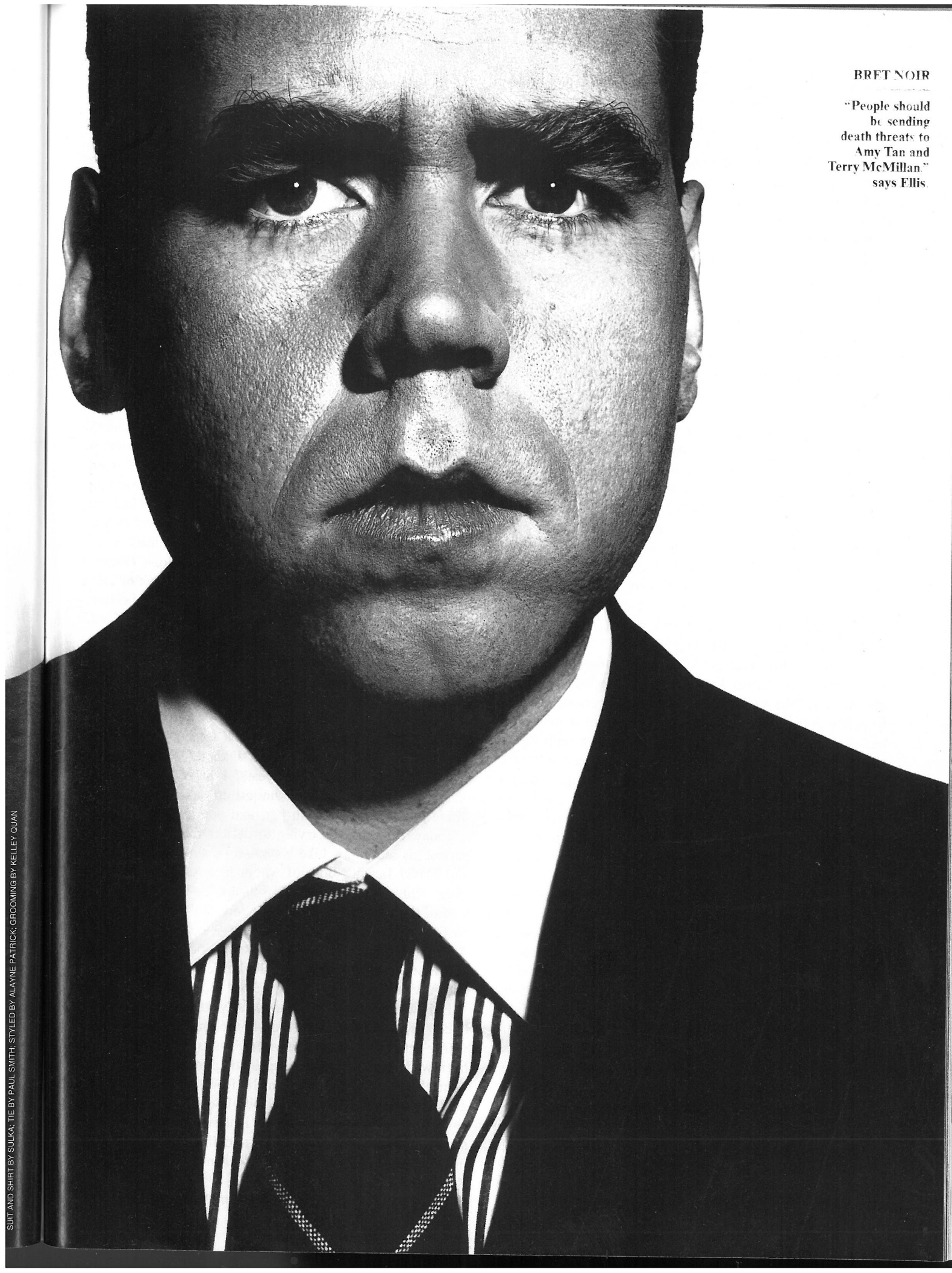


SUIT AND SHIRT BY SULKA; TIE BY PAUL SMITH; STYLED BY ALAYNE PATRICK; GROOMING BY KELLEY QUAN



BRET NOIR

"People should be sending death threats to Amy Tan and Terry McMillan," says Ellis.

SUIT AND SHIRT BY SULKA; TIE BY PAUL SMITH; STYLED BY ALAYNE PATRICK; GROOMING BY KELLEY QUAN

enjoying his success at late-night clubs, licked their chops. The *enfant terrible* was suddenly merely *terrible.*

Now, as his fourth novel, *The Informers,* rolls off Knopf presses, Ellis is bracing for a new fusillade. According to a source close to the publisher, warning signs are forming on the horizon; sinister conspiracies have already formed. An internal memo from Knopf was leaked to the media; a very violent passage, describing a vampire's excision of a 14-year-old's uterus (cut from the final manuscript), was printed in a gossip column. A less than enthusiastic trade-magazine review mysteriously appeared in another publication a week early. You wonder if it's all a tempest in a teacup.

Ellis, however, cannot afford to wonder this. "The knives have been sharpened," he says, perhaps a bit hopefully, for without the onslaught there would be no sizzle. And silence would be truly deafening. For Bret Easton Ellis is in the curious and unenviable position of *having* to stir up a ruckus. "I mean, I think they're really waiting," he says, gearing himself up for a battle that must engender ambivalent feelings. On the one hand, he needs the attention. On the other, the attacks can't help but take their toll on even a media-jaded literary warlord.

Clearly there are no plans for amends: "How do you do that?" Ellis asks angrily, no verbal cracks in his public façade. "Isn't that a horrible, wimpy, craven thing to do? I mean, they *would* probably love it if I would crawl back and kiss their ass. . . . But I'm so vilified by the critical establishment that if I *did* . . . I don't think anyone would give a shit anywhere. I think they'd *still* be screaming and hollering and stamping their feet."

Through it all, you get the feeling that Bret Ellis, whom his writer friend Joan Didion—no naïve observer—describes as "the sweetest, most sensitive person," is really pretty vulnerable. Beneath the rhetoric of a man who has learned the hard way to fight histrionics with histrionics, there is the sensibility of someone quite different peeking through, someone who, on the face of it, would seem an unlikely chronicler of serial killers, someone who might, in another age, have been a shy, reasonably talented young writer with a future. Despite his efforts to stake a claim to the vitriol of the Mailers and Vidals, Bret Easton Ellis has a wistful look in his eyes.

But he rages like Bluebeard, ranting, spewing, and recycling his own quotes. "Artists today . . . everyone is *so* careful, you rarely read anything or see anything that really kind of drives you crazy, makes you mad, gets you excited. I mean, it's all so gentle; it's so polite." Later, he adds, "I mean, I think people should be sending death threats to Amy Tan and Terry McMillan." He seems particularly fond of this death-threat sound bite, which he repeats twice during our conversations, giggling merrily at his own audacity.

These tirades have the stagy feeling of Kabuki pique. But what lies under the warrior mask? Novelist Susanna Moore says that "more than anything else Bret likes to give pause. He is a professional pause giver." Others agree that Ellis loves to play provocateur. Even Ellis himself. "I was naughty," he crows to me at one point, recalling a sexy bit from *Zero.* But provocation, as Madonna and the wreckage of the 80s have taught us, is not ultimately a talent in itself, and "playing" is not the same thing as "being." Bret's provocations feel, to the casual observer at least, a bit like protective coloration. You don't have to spend much time with him to wonder if maybe, despite it all, he is a little scared of what he has made of his career, scared that perhaps he has somehow gone too far.

Less than Zero, which in the words of Ellis's ICM agent, Amanda Urban, "was the first novel to talk about drugs and bisexuality in high school," also bears the dubious distinction of having defined the particular ennui of Generation X before anyone else knew what the hell was up. (Ellis should be getting residuals from *Beverly Hills, 90210.*) It is most interesting as artifaction—the reflection of a moment—and as the production of a certain kind of jaded, MTV sensibility that seems to imitate and incorporate everything it admires. It doesn't take a Ph.D. to see that L.A.-born Bret Easton Ellis, like many artists, like many self-conscious young people who have concocted selves from media compost, is a master at imitation—at assuming poses adopted from life and art. In New York, he and his peers wove postmodern books and attitudes from styles and identities borrowed from all over. Notable influences included older writers such as—in Ellis's case—Joan Didion. *Less than Zero* is more than influenced by the work of Didion; it is almost as if Ellis had appropriated her perspective. The very first anecdote he tells me—about a mother in Cool, California, who was killed by a mountain lion during a morning run—could have been plucked from *Play It as It Lays.* It's a little eerie. You can call this hero worship, but with Ellis and other members of his generation, identification goes beyond worship; the deity becomes ingrained. "When I got to Bennington, I was a total Didion fanatic who turned everyone on to Joan Didion," Ellis tells me. "Now, like for the last five years, I have gone to their house for Thanksgiving and I am just down to the point now where I can hang out with her, and you know, it's O.K."

Today, Ellis may be trying to deflect this appropriating part of his sensibility. Like his 80s-era peers Jay McInerney and David Leavitt, both of whom have also suffered the slings and arrows of youthful success, he has, for at least part of the year, abandoned New York. To persuade him to participate in his first extensive interview since he finished *American Psycho,* I flew down to Richmond, Virginia, where he has sequestered himself in willful exile on a shady maple-lined street in the basement of a small red brick town house.

Ellis works and sleeps in a sparsely furnished room. It's like a deprivation tank or a cave, the kind of place where you're left to your own devices. You sense that he has burrowed in here for the purpose of plotting his next act. There is a scruffy mattress on the floor, topped by a tangled tan blanket. There are 50-odd books, towers of primly stacked CDs. Against a wall is a simple wooden desk strewn with the pink legal pads and the spiral notebooks on which he writes in longhand with music blaring. Lately he favors Smashing Pumpkins.

He cohabitates here with a friend whose identity he

likes to keep secret: "My landlord," as he refers to him. Ellis has never said much about his sexuality, allowing many observers to project the aimless bisexuality of Clay, the protagonist of *Zero,* onto the author himself.

In conversation, he addresses the issue this way: "I get a lot of letters that sort of raise the issue and ask, 'Well, what's going on with you? Where do you stand on all this?' And it's always made me think, Well, that's interesting, no one really knows. . . . I'm perceived as being gay by certain groups, or straight by certain groups, or bi by certain groups. . . . And I kind of like that mystique," he says, as if mystique were the real thing, the thing to be considered.

As I look around his lair, he looms behind me, ill at ease, a symphony of fidgets and tics. He seems to have a heightened awareness of himself and his every motion, and this creates a distance which must feel troubling to him. He's a tall—six-foot-one—and bulky fellow, clad from head to toe in somber black. His debauched cherub's face is pale, with great cheeks bisected by deep lines. His chin is protruding, dimpled. At one point, I notice, he buries his head in the folds of a robe that's festooned on the bathroom door.

On his worktable is the manuscript for what he calls, ominously, "the big book," on the subject of supermodels and celebrity. There is something to be said here about a writer not much over 30 talking about "the big book," but Ellis is not without irony when he makes the reference. Ellis, in fact, is *never* far from irony. He says that the big book has been in progress for about four years, but has been derailed by "distractions" brought on by *Psycho.* The book he has managed to complete, *The Informers,* is a novel stitched together from L.A. stories—recent and otherwise—laced with gory preternatural happenings and themes of sexual ambiguity, passivity, and ennui. One of the book's protagonists, Graham, sleeps with a panoply of his fellow catatonics: his stepmother, Cheryl; his friend Martin; Martin's friend Christie. He functions, like all of Ellis's protagonists, as a languorous, roving electric eye.

"It's a kaleidoscopic and fractured view of Los Angeles in the early 80s," Ellis says. "It's sort of like a sectional diary I've kept over the last 10 years. A lot of it's fiction. A lot of it's nonfiction. A lot of it's diary entries." He doesn't seem to make much distinction between the forms.

The tone, disaffected and deadpan, echoes *Less than Zero* and its depiction of the entropy of L.A. teen life. But here the sense of anomie is heightened even further; the clock truly seems to be winding down: vampires cruise the streets of Encino in Porsches and schlepp over to Beverly Hills for dinner at the Ivy. "I keep feeling that people are becoming less human and more animalistic," says one bleary-eyed supercipher.

The book is a sort of informal record, Ellis says, that includes the time after the publication of *Zero,* in which he experienced a lot of pain, a period which he is no longer shy about recounting. It seems, in fact, to fascinate him. Yet he is distant, like his narrators. It is as though he is outlining the decline of another character he has invented.

He tells me that since *Zero* he has suffered two major nervous breakdowns and a period of intensive psychotherapy. He must work hard to stave off periodic attacks of anxiety (his doctor prescribed exercise), and gets depressed, but controls the problem with a drug called Klonopin. "It's been rough," Ellis admits to me at one point, with a quiet chuckle that becomes a long, drawn-out moan.

> "I'm yearning for a simpler, better, almost Beaver Cleaver style of life."

The first breakdown came in the spring of 1986, in the wake of *Less than Zero,* when he was still a senior at Bennington College, in Vermont. "I have no idea how it started," he says evenly. "I just woke up one morning and began to cry uncontrollably for about a week. I became incredibly stressed out about my success. I don't know why I freaked out and why I became a wreck. I don't know why. I can't give you specifics. It just happened."

During this period, he also developed a fear of flying, which he has only recently been able to conquer—with the help of vodka and tranquilizers. "I can't get into a double bed on MGM Grand without a bottle of Stoli." Cross-country trips had to be made on Amtrak, and he says he endured them by locking himself into a sleeper compartment with a transcontinental supply of marijuana.

After his recovery—and some fence-mending with Bennington, where he was flunking out of classes—Ellis completed work on his second book, *The Rules of Attraction,* "a lazy, draggy campus comedy about people misrepresenting other people's advances and affections." Critics were put off. But the book brought Ellis to the attention of no less than Gore Vidal. "I thought it was really rather inspired," says Vidal. "These nutty characters, each on his own track—and the tracks keep crossing. It was a wonderfully comic novel."

But as the book was published in 1987, Ellis foundered again. He had moved from Bennington to New York City, and was frequenting the restaurants of the nanosecond, often in the company of Jay McInerney and publishing whizzes Morgan Entrekin and Gary Fisketjon. "I'd go to parties fucked up out of my mind and then plan on escaping the party to get even more fucked up," *(Continued on page 124)*

BILL KING

archive was delivered to her, years after King's death, it was incomplete, and contained only his commercial photographs.

There was never any question that some of King's pictures would be missing. The choicest of the "dirty" Polaroids, as well as the original slides of some of King's favorite pictures, which were said to be in his safe-deposit box, have never been recovered. But Janet McClelland says that numerous files from the archive also arrived empty. She says she does not have any of the pictures or layouts from the book she knows her brother wanted published. She adds that the model releases for the book photos are also missing, which she knows because several prominent people have called her inquiring—"well, they were threats, but in a nice way"—about what would happen to the nudes. She insists that the only Polaroids she received were those done for editorial shots. If there are other Polaroids, taken at parties, she doesn't know a thing about them, she says.

McClelland admits that the family was shocked when they heard some of the stories about Bill King's life. But she insists that his reported belief that they were homophobic was his own fear; any belief in the fashion community that she would be squeamish about releasing homoerotic work, she says, is unfounded. She even invokes Robert Mapplethorpe when discussing how her brother might have been remembered.

McClelland knows that some people in the photography business won't re-use Bill King pictures because of disparaging rumors that have been circulated, some by Bill himself, about her and her family. With John Turner's help, she has managed to sell rights to several King photos for editorial use and made a onetime settlement with Lancôme for advertising shots. But the pictures do not generate the approximately $20,000 a year she is spending to keep them in an archive facility. In fact, she doesn't know how much longer she can maintain them.

"I have to make a decision fairly soon," she says. "They aren't being looked at, the envelopes have to be changed. They're going to be destroyed. . . . That would be a horrible thing. I am very concerned about the pictures." Because of the money she has invested, she has been reluctant to just *donate* the pictures to an organization that might care for them. She asks if Stewart Shining might be interested in helping her. "We've suffered a lot of the same things," she says of Shining. "I don't know why we haven't worked together." She seems unaware that Shining and his lawyer have been discussing a way to forcibly relieve her of the burden of the photos.

Just before the state supreme court decided last fall that Shining did not have to pay the old warehouse bill, a fire in the *new* warehouse, where the furniture and antiques had been moved, destroyed much of what he was to inherit. And, apparently, nothing was insured. So now Shining is contemplating a suit against Janet McClelland—personally, and as King's executor—and the estate of Marge Waldt, seeking the value of his mentor's charred and waterlogged furniture and personal effects before they were destroyed. He would also demand King's photographs—either as compensation for what was burned or as the "works of art" he was to inherit. The estate's attorney has already threatened a countersuit.

And even if Janet McClelland and Stewart Shining decided they wanted to make peace, grant Bill King his dying wish of being inducted into the pantheon of coffee-table-book photographers, and finally lay him to rest, it is unclear if their lawyers would let them. Peter Eikenberry has yet to submit to the court his fee for nearly seven years of work for the estate—billed hourly because, when Bill King was thought to be worth millions, it seemed like a good way to keep costs lower than charging a percentage. Shining also has a considerable legal tab. The legal bills alone could be the final reason King's photographic legacy remains in limbo.

That would be sad, but, in a way, it's a situation Bill King might have loved. It would mean that his life went from *The Importance of Being Earnest* to *Bleak House*. And that is very British indeed. □

ELLIS

(Continued from page 97) he remembers. "I began to get much more pessimistic and nihilistic towards the world."

It was around this time that Ellis began intensive work on *American Psycho*. And it was around this time that word began to circulate: *he was losing his mind*. "The experience of writing *American Psycho* was pretty traumatic for Bret," says McInerney. Visitors to his loft were puzzled by the stacks of fashion, beauty, and stereo magazines they saw lying about. Pages were ripped out and taped to the walls. It was research: inspiration for the numbingly long and detailed monologues of Patrick Bateman, *Psycho*'s Wall Street wunderkind turned slasher. Ellis, in perhaps his most fevered self-reinvention, learned about how people murder by reading the same textbooks used by the F.B.I. This helped inform the roughly 40 pages of ghastly carnage interspersed throughout the book—carnage rendered in tones as mind-bendingly prosaic as the descriptions of the stereos and shoes that obsess Bateman.

"Toward the end of that time he got pretty depressed and wigged out," McInerney remembers. "He had locked himself away. He was morose and depressed. . . . I finally went down to his apartment one night, just to kind of pry him out and take him out. I just thought somebody better shake him and make sure he was alive."

What comes through in Ellis, apart from his self-conscious show-and-tell about his neurosis, is his politeness, and the near-courtly kindness that punctuates his more caustic moments. "He's one of the most generous people I've ever met," says author Jill Eisenstadt, a friend from Bennington. "Very gentle . . . the kind of person who gets all teary-eyed over seeing a stray dog or something." He is also renowned among the young literary set for his godfatherly deeds. "He has played a very significant behind-the-scenes role in promoting the careers of a variety of young writers who are beginning to get known," says Simon & Schuster's Bob Asahina, who edited Ellis's first three books. After speaking to his friends, who have learned to see beyond Ellis's bad-boy act, it's hard to reconcile how this upright guy became transformed into a dark-shrouded figure of iniquity. Maybe it all stems from the fact that you don't ever quite know when he's being serious. A certain slangy level of ironic detachment informs even his most serious statements—and not everybody gets it. "I am an incredibly moralistic person," he tells me over dinner in the ornate dining salon of Richmond's Jefferson hotel, where the pianist plays an adagio rendition of the *Brady Bunch* theme. "People assume I

stand for what is in my books. . . . All the books are narrated by the characters themselves. . . . There is no authorial voice stating, 'O.K., Patrick Bateman is a crazy madman.' Everything I've written so far is about characters just basically speaking for themselves. A lot of people totally mistake the books in some cases as advocating a certain behavior or as glorifying a certain form of behavior. . . . I mean, I'm a very, very uptight person. . . . I'm yearning for a simpler, better, almost Beaver Cleaver style of life."

This sometimes obscure moralistic vision has become the touchstone of Ellis's work for a circle of influential critics and writers who have begun to examine Ellis in the three years since *Psycho*'s ignominious debut, a time when the rhetoric grew so heated that the Walt Disney Company barred him from the opening of Euro Disney. Among the book's defenders is radio personality and critic Michael Silverblatt, who includes Ellis on a list of notable authors such as de Sade and Genet. At Yale last semester, *American Psycho* was taught by Ellis's friend Susanna Moore, who used it in her writing seminar as an example of polemic. "I think it is very funny," she says. "It has a meanness that was misunderstood. I saw the book as being polemical, outraged, pissed off."

"There was a massive denial about the strengths of the book," says author-director Michael Tolkin, another booster. "People scapegoated the violence, but that wasn't his sin. He made a connection between the language of fashion writing and serial murder. It wasn't so much that he was holding up the mirror to our urges to kill as to our urges to find the right tie to wear while we're killing."

Director David Cronenberg (*Dead Ringers, The Fly, Naked Lunch*) was so taken with *American Psycho* that he thought of making it into a film. But he stopped short after concluding that the book would not translate to the screen. "I was amazed at how good the book was," he says. "I felt it was an existentialist epic. . . . You invent a world where clothes and money and brand names are the value system and you are in the mind of someone who is locked into that. But inside that mind there is an awareness that it all is meaningless and artificial, completely invented. And the murders, the hideousness, are an attempt to break out of that, to try to shatter it and to connect with something real."

I am standing with Bret Easton Ellis, provocateur, outside the Regency Square mall in Richmond, trying to connect with something real. "The thing that struck me about Kurt Cobain's suicide is not that I was sad but that it wasn't Kathie Lee Gifford," Ellis intones in a perfectly quotable but ultimately meaningless verbal display as we head over to Hecht's department store. Ellis is never short of dialogue. "There is only one thing I'm going to tell you off the record," he jokes as we pass brigades of white-jacketed lipstick technicians, "and it is that this is where I come to buy my men's Clinique."

> "Trumps closing and Joan Didion and John Dunne moving away. That was the end of L.A. for me."

He seems more comfortable in the mall than anywhere I have seen him, though I would still not say he is at ease. He tells me that he doesn't like fluorescent lights and that he hates being near other people. "See that nice little lady over there with the stroller? You know she's a Klan member. You see all those people? You know there's something roiling beneath them." He just keeps lobbing off commentary, seemingly desperate to fill the space between us.

There is humor in all of this. But Ellis's X-ray-vision thing is wearing, and ultimately distancing, despite the fact that he may, in life *and* art, be attempting to shatter the normal barriers. Shock, however, is not ultimately the same thing as communication. He seems to perceive my growing disconnection and segues into a different mode. The mall, he says, reminds him of L.A. and home, and the conversation turns to his father, who recently died. He begins to tell me a story about his father and Trumps restaurant, where they used to lunch, but his memories of his father are short-circuited by the details of the place itself, its "casualness," its "unique and original food." The words flow out of him. But he gives no hint of emotion. "I mean, the grape quesadilla was something that blew my mind. I don't think it was that edible, but it was something I loved. I mean, presentation was key. . . . Trumps closing and Joan Didion and John Dunne moving away. That was the end of L.A. for me."

I am lingering over the phrase "presentation was key" as I notice a newspaper proclaiming the victory of Quentin Tarantino's violent masterpiece, *Pulp Fiction,* in the feature competition at Cannes. Ellis doesn't know it, but at this moment film weasels all over the French Riviera have begun to tout the prospects for the "still-in-negotiations" movie version of *American Psycho.* The Tarantino vogue may make Ellis seem like a prescient genius. By the time *Psycho* is in theaters, the violence of Ellis's vision may be commonplace, old-hat, acceptable. By that juncture, Ellis may have struck a new pose. The next Ellis may be completely different. But he says he'll continue to use shock—to bridge the distance.

"Late one night," he tells me, "I was watching *Tommy,* the movie. I remember that was the pivotal moment in my childhood. I was 10 years old when I saw it; it was in San Francisco and it just completely blew me away. That's why I got so excited when *Tommy* opened on Broadway. But I went to see it and it was more or less the Clinton-era *Tommy*. . . . I mean, [the movie] basically ends with the death of Tommy's parents! The Broadway musical for some reason turned it around and turned it into this saga of a dysfunctional family and everyone lives at the end and Tommy, I think, gets *married.* I am still just appalled. . . . I wish that a lot of artists now had that sort of *crazy* passion, where it's like I'm going totally whole hog and I am going to dig into this and present it my way and I don't care how screwed up it is. This is how I'm interested in approaching it!" □