



BLOW

AN '80S LOVE STORY

BY JAY MCINERNEY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTOPHER MAKOS

ESQUIRE HAS A LONG HISTORY WITH JAY MCINERNEY.

→ A year after his 1984 debut novel, *Bright Lights, Big City*, came to represent everything wild and dangerous and decadent and fun about New York City during that decade, we sent him to profile a totem of too many late nights: Mick Jagger. “You can’t really interview him,” McInerney told us at the time. “He’s so good at hiding what’s private, so reticent about the real things. It’s very hard to catch him off guard. He’s divided. His physique is adolescent, but his face is lined.” This description sounds an awful lot like the magazine fact-checker with dark, late-night secrets in *Bright Lights*. Soon after, he published a pair of short stories, then made a cameo on the cover of the July 1989 fiction issue as a critic-slashing literary ninja (it seemed like a good idea at the time) before returning with regularity in the nineties.

This month marks McInerney’s return to these pages with an exclusive excerpt from *Bright, Precious Days*, the third novel in his series about Corrine and Russell Calloway, a young Manhattan couple who stumbled through and then conquered the glitzy Manhattan literary parties of the eighties (Brightness Falls); survived 9/11, infidelity, infertility in the early aughts (*The Good Life*); and now, amid the financial crisis and Obama’s rise, risk losing everything they’ve spent decades building—the money, the marriage, the apartment, the storybook New York life.

In the story that follows, the narrative flashes back to the era of McInerney’s great inspiration—the eighties. Corrine is just out of college; her then-boyfriend Russell is an ocean away at Oxford, while his more adventurous best friend Jeff is just a subway ride away in SoHo. A visit to see Jeff downtown couldn’t hurt, could it?

THE SUMMER AFTER

graduation Jeff is subletting a loft in SoHo. The word itself seems as raffish and bohemian as the neighborhood, half-deserted, inhabited mainly by painters and sculptors in search of cheap studio space. The district is zoned for light industry and it’s illegal to actually live here, which only

adds to its mystique. Jeff is cat-sitting for a girl he knows who’s touring with her band for three months, and who in turn sublets the place illegally from a painter living in Berlin. It’s just the kind of convoluted and jury-rigged yet serendipitous situation in which Jeff inevitably seems to find himself, or, more accurately, in which he manages to place himself.

Jeff is the best friend of Corrine’s putative fiancé, Russell Calloway, the three of them having met as classmates at Brown. Having recently graduated, Corrine lives on the Upper East Side and works at Sotheby’s. To her, SoHo is a mysterious southern region of the island allegedly inhabited by artists and who knows whom? No one who’s gone to Miss Porter’s, certainly. It seems a little eerie to her, almost deserted, as she emerges from the subway at Spring Street and walks west, her shadow inching out across the buckling sidewalk, past the ornate, soot-stained facades of the buildings that had once been sweatshops and factories. She passes a heavily bearded man in overalls sitting on a stoop, smoking; she would guess he’s homeless except for the paint caked on his fingers and his OshKoshes. For all she knows he could be James Rosenquist or Frank Stella.

She can’t help feeling very adventurous coming down here, almost tingling with anticipation as she approaches Greene Street. Jeff offered to come uptown but she insisted on seeing his place.

Russell’s at Oxford on his fellowship, studying Romantic poetry. He writes her long letters about his reading and the quirkiness of the Brits and the horrors of Marmite, letters that inevitably culminate in declarations of love. They can’t afford to talk long-distance more than once or twice a month. In his mind they’re already engaged but she’s been very specific in asking him to see how he feels after eight months apart. It’s been six weeks and already he’s worried that she’ll meet someone else. She hasn’t met anyone, and

visiting Russell's best friend feels like a way of being closer to him.

She finds the building with its elaborate cast-iron facade—grimy columns framing tall, arched windows, the rust showing in patches through the layers of once-white paint and city grit. On the sidewalk in front of the building is a splattered black human silhouette that looks like it might be a crime-scene outline of a body.

At the door, a cluster of mismatched buzzers is mounted on a sheet of plywood, one of them labeled with a scrap of yellow legal paper on which the initials JP are scrawled. She presses the button and waits, eventually looking up when a window above rattles open and Jeff's head emerges.

"You sure you want to come up?"

"Absolutely," she says. "I've never seen an artist's loft."

"It ain't pretty." He dangles something from his fingers. "Catch."

A key attached to a piece of dirty balsa wood clatters to the sidewalk.

"Fifth floor," he calls.

Inside she's confronted with a vast creaking stairway made from ancient oak planks that recedes as it ascends ahead of her, each floor taking her farther back into the building until finally she finds herself on the top floor, where the door stands ajar. "Not exactly a stairway to heaven," Jeff says, bowing deeply and ushering her in, hunching slightly to make his height less daunting. He's wearing his standard outfit, an untucked Brooks Brothers button-down over a pair of ripped jeans.

"Please don't say welcome to my humble abode."

"I was going to say my cleaning lady died, but I don't actually have one."

"It's very...lived in."

"I was also going to say—this is where the magic doesn't happen."

It's a mess—clothes and books and overflowing ashtrays everywhere, but the space itself is grand, with a soaring pressed-tin ceiling supported by more columns and huge arched windows on either end. One wall is dominated by a long mural, all graffiti swirls and distorted letters and fanciful animals, by an artist friend of his who painted it recently after partying all night in the loft, he explains.

"That's such a stupid verb, *partying*," she says. "I mean, really, don't you think? It's so coy. What does it mean—does it mean drinking? Doing drugs? Having sex? All of the above?" This sounds prissy and pedantic even to her and she realizes she is nervous, though she isn't sure why.



IMAGES TAKEN FROM "PORTRAITS OF AN ERA" PRINT. AVAILABLE THROUGH FAHEY/KLEIN GALLERY, L.A.

At one end of the room a mattress floats on the wide floorboards like a dilapidated barge. At the other end is a door resting on two filing cabinets—a makeshift desk with a big beige IBM Selectric perched between stacks of books. Russell has been jealous of Jeff's typewriter for years—the ultimate writing machine. In between, an island of decrepit furniture suggests a living area: a brown legless couchlike object, a bean-bag chair, and a surfboard supported on either end by cinder blocks.

"Originally, 77 Greene Street was one of New York's most notorious cathouses," Jeff tells her. "When that building burned down, this came next and housed a corset factory for many years."

"Unfettered wantonness yielding to the creation of feminine fetters."

"Relentless," Jeff says, "the march of civilization."

For all its shabbiness, the sheer expanse and the architectural details give it the aura of a place where great deeds should be performed, great paintings painted, or even a great novel written—and that, she knows, is his sole ambition, though he carries himself with a self-deprecating cynicism and has so far published only a single short story in *The Paris Review*. But it's his whole identity, Jeff Pierce, the writer, the *poète maudit*. When he read *The Sun Also Rises* at the age of thirteen his destiny was revealed. Robert Lowell is some kind of distant uncle. At Brown he walked around with a

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"DRUGS," HE SAYS. "WHAT, COCAINE?"

HE BEAMS. "EVER TRIED IT?"

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copy of *Ulysses* under his arm and studied with John Hawkes, the avant-garde novelist, who vouched for his genius. He was one of the few non-New Yorkers at Brown who visited Manhattan frequently, eschewing the traditional landmarks of his classmates—Trader Vic's and Dorrian's Red Hand—in favor of poetry readings and punk-rock clubs downtown. Somewhere along the line he became acquainted with William Burroughs, who, he says, now lives in a former YMCA gym on the Bowery.

A black-and-white cat rubs itself fervently against Jeff's leg. She remembers this about him—animals always like him. "That's Kurt Weill," Jeff says as the cat slides away.

"I might have known," she says.

He offers her a Marlboro, and lights it, and then his own, with a Zippo. It gives them something to do together, and something to do with their hands.

"Why do you always have the collars of your button-downs unbuttoned?" she asks. "Have you ever thought of getting the regular kind of collars, without buttons? It seems like it would be easier. I mean, if you're not going to button them anyway."

"Not really. I like having the option."

She's just making conversation, knowing this is one of his signatures, like his grandfather's old gold Longines that he wears with the face on the inside of his wrist. Not that he would ever tell you himself—he does his best to distance himself from his heritage—but Jeff comes from one of those old New England families that view the Pilgrims as arrivistes. They wear threadbare blazers with Wellingtons and drive shit-brown Oldsmobiles. Some have lots of money, others only the memory of it. Even those who've escaped the gravity of Boston tend in the summers to cluster in rambling shingled houses on the rocky Protestant coast of Maine, occasionally traversing the pebbly beaches to dunk themselves in the frigid waters of the Atlantic, more often sailing the surface in wooden boats. But Jeff has come to downtown Manhattan to reinvent himself from scratch, or so he likes to believe, though he's likewise determined to remain true, in some sense, to his roots, to be at once authentic and unique. His grandfather's watch might seem to complicate the self-invention narrative; on the other hand it distinguishes the wearer from the aspiring bohemian herd. Just as William Burroughs, the famous junkie and wife killer, dresses in three-piece suits.

"So," she says, inhaling a lungful of smoke, "what does one do downtown?"

"Drugs," he says.

"Very funny."

"You asked."

His demeanor blending boyish and smug, she sees that he is actually serious. Serious, but also amused at his own cleverness, his knowingness. He wants to shock her.

"What, cocaine?"

He beams. "Ever tried it?"

She shakes her head.

"Want to?"

Of course she doesn't want to seem like a—what, a wimp, a prude, uncool? But still... *cocaine*? She knew some kids at Brown did it, city kids who went back to Manhattan on weekends and hung at Studio 54 and Xenon, then bragged about it back in Providence. But Corrine isn't that kind of girl.

"No pressure," he says.

"What are you saying?" she says. "That we would, like, do it... now?" She seems unable even to name the drug, and knows that she is stalling for time, trying to decide what she feels about this totally unexpected proposition.

"Well, yeah."

She trusts Jeff and doesn't think he'd lure her into anything really dangerous. On the other hand that's the whole thing about Jeff; he is more reckless than the rest of their crowd at Brown, the guy who wrapped an Austin-Healey around a telephone pole outside Providence and walked away unscathed. That's one of the reasons they're all attracted to him.

"You have some?"

"I wouldn't offer if I didn't."

"Will I like it?"

"I personally guarantee it."

She shrugs. "Okay." This is definitely one way to cut through the awkwardness of the moment. "I don't even know how you do it," she says.

She follows him over to the makeshift desk; he clears books and papers away and picks up a framed picture, an almost-familiar sepia-toned image of a beautiful boy with flyaway hair and sleepy eyes, in disheveled Edwardian garb. Suddenly, it comes to her. "Rimbaud?"

He nods and lays the frame flat, unfolding a rectangle of shiny paper on the glass, as if creating some sort of origami.

After tipping the contents of the unfurled packet onto the glass, he chops it up with a one-edged razor blade and lays out eight identical lines of white powder.

She can't help giggling when he hands her a short plastic straw. "Are we really going to do this? I'm not sure I know how. Why don't I watch you do it first?"

He takes the straw and leans over the glass, neatly inhaling one of the white lines and then, moving the straw to his left nostril, another.

"Wow, you're good at that."

"It's like anything else. Like how you get to Carnegie Hall."

"What?"

SHE'S NEVER FELT SO DRIVEN,
SO DESPERATE. SOME SORT OF ANIMAL SOUND
ESCAPES HER. EVEN THE INEVITABLE
THOUGHT OF RUSSELL FAILS TO QUELL—
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"Practice."

Why is she suddenly feeling so slow-witted?

"Your turn."

She takes the straw and bends down over the desk. As she leans forward Jeff gathers the hair around her neck and holds it, which seems very sexy to her and also makes the thing she is about to do seem less dangerous.

She can only manage to inhale half of a line the first time. It's a very weird sensation, a not entirely unpleasant burning in her nasal passages, and then, a few minutes later, a bittersweet drip at the back of her throat. After several tries she consumes two of the lines and feels very pleased with herself. Having been a little afraid and uncertain, she now congratulates herself on being brave and going for it. Nothing scary here. She feels almost normal, except better than normal.

"I think I'm feeling it, but I'm not sure," she says. "I feel good but not, like, stoned. You know, I've never really liked pot, to tell you the truth, that feeling of not being myself, of being kind of slowed down and dumbed down. That *dopey* feeling. No wonder they call it dope, right? But now I feel like myself. But sort of, I don't know, a really upbeat version of myself. Is that the cocaine? Because actually I feel pretty great. I feel like, I don't know, like *doing* something."

Jeff smiles and nods.

"Say something."

"*Something*."

"You're teasing me. Am I talking too much? I'm talking too much, aren't I? Is that the cocaine? Is that what it does?"

"It comes with the territory."

"But why aren't you talking as much as me?"

"Be careful what you wish for."

Jeff leans down and snorts another line, then kneels down to riffle through a stack of LPs on the floor beside the stereo, selecting a record and placing it on the turntable.

"I like that," Corrine says of the wailing guitars and whining, world-weary vocals.

"It's Television," Jeff says.

She looks back down at the stereo, wondering if that was a joke. She often feels this way in Jeff's company, as though she is missing out on some inside reference. Maybe the drug is messing with her perception, although in fact she feels incredibly clear-headed and sharp at the moment.

"It's a stereo," she says.

"Television's the name of the band. Unfortunately no longer with us. I saw them in '78 at CBGB's."

The singer's voice is very nasal and adenoidal—maybe he did cocaine? What is he singing? She listens for the next chorus. "I fell right into the arms of Venus de Milo." It takes her a minute.

And then she says, "Very clever. I get it. Better late than never, I guess. You must think I'm very uncool, basically."

"I've never thought that. I think you're amazing."

"I don't know the new music, or even the new art. I mean, I'm good up to Jasper Johns and Rauschenberg, the Stones and Led Zeppelin, but after that..." She shrugs. "I feel like rock 'n' roll kind of petered out a few years ago, but that's probably just me. Is Led Zeppelin still cool? How do you find these things out? I mean is there some committee that decides? A bunch of cool kids in leather jackets smoking bidis who sit around and pronounce on these issues? Whoever they are, they don't have my telephone number. And my taste in literature is pretty conventional. I tried, but I couldn't get past the first twenty pages of *Naked Lunch*. And that book you gave me last month, *Finnegans Stew*?"

"*Mulligan Stew*, by Gilbert Sorrentino. Finnegans was Joyce. *Finnegans Wake*. Although curiously enough a character from *Finnegans Wake* turns up in *Mulligan Stew*."

"That's what I mean—a novel within a novel within a novel, all that postmodern self-consciousness. A writer writing a book about a writer writing a book. Jesus, I'm sorry, I just get lost. I like Edith Wharton and Anthony Powell and Graham Greene. I'm just not hip enough. I live on East Seventy-first Street and I belong to the Colony Club and the Daughters of the American Revolution. You grew up in the same world I did but you've sort of rejected all that."

"That doesn't define you. You're so much more than that. I don't believe in types, I believe in individuals. I believe in *you*. You're like no one else. I don't know anyone else at all like you. You don't judge. You're the least judgmental, least prejudiced person I know. You take everyone at his own worth. You look at a picture and see things nobody else does. You're smart. You're funny. You don't accept conventional wisdom. You're beautiful."

"You really believe all that?" Corrine is amazed. She always imagined that Jeff was judging her and finding her wanting. She thought that each of what she considered to be her secret flaws was glaringly obvious to Russell's smart, cynical, good-looking best friend. More than she's ever been willing to admit, she craves his approval, even his admiration. Actually, she wants him to love her, she realizes. That doesn't necessarily mean that she loves him, but she wants him to want her and she certainly wants him, never more so than right this minute. He seems to divine this sentiment, stepping towards her and touching her cheek, cradling her face in his hand and guiding her toward his lips, kissing her avidly, almost violently, pressing his lips against hers and probing between them with his tongue, Corrine returning the ardor as she puts her arms around his shoulders and pulls him closer.



It feels as if there's no time to spare, that after so long a wait they need to seize the moment immediately. He lifts her in his arms and carries her to the bed without taking his lips from hers. They struggle out of their clothes as if they were on fire, she tugging his belt open as he scrabbles at the hook of her bra. She finds herself undoing her belt, unzipping her jeans and stepping out of them. His jeans are still wrapped around his ankles when, twisted on top of her, he pushes himself inside of her. Some sort of animal sound escapes her and then she thrusts her hips upward. She's never felt so driven, so desperate, and even the inevitable thought of Russell

fails to quell—seems even to fan—her desire. She has never before come so quickly, just a little ahead of him, and it occurs to her as she returns to her body and her senses to wonder about the drug's influence. Although she has imagined this experience more than once—she's been wildly infatuated with Jeff since they met—and she finds it hard to believe that she will ever regret it.

Later, however, safely back uptown, she will question the postcoital conviction that she was somehow bringing herself closer to Russell by fucking his best friend.

That just might have been the drugs talking. ■