

**BRET**

**EASTON**

**ELLIS**

**AUTHOR OF AMERICAN PSYCHO**

**THE  
SHARDS**

**A NOVEL**

**Also by Bret Easton Ellis**

*White*

*Imperial Bedrooms*

*Lunar Park*

*Glamorama*

*The Informers*

*American Psycho*

*The Rules of Attraction*

*Less Than Zero*

# The SHARDS

Bret  
Easton  
Ellis

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# Contents

[Cover](#)

[Also by Bret Easton Ellis](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Introduction](#)

## [FALL/1981](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[\*Author's Note\*](#)

[\*A Note About the Author\*](#)

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*For no one*

*Do you remember back in old L.A.  
When everybody drove a Chevrolet?  
Whatever happened to the boy next door  
The suntanned, crew-cut, all-American male?*

“Beach Baby”  
The First Class

If you want to keep a secret you must also hide it from  
yourself.

1984  
George Orwell



MANY YEARS AGO I REALIZED THAT A BOOK, a novel, is a dream that asks itself to be written in the same way we fall in love with someone: the dream becomes impossible to resist, there's nothing you can do about it, you finally give in and succumb even if your instincts tell you to run the other way because this could be, in the end, a dangerous game—someone will get hurt. For a few of us the first ideas, images, the initial stirrings can prompt the writer to automatically immerse themselves in the novel's world, its romance and fantasy, its secrets. For others it can take longer to feel this connection more clearly, ages to realize how much you needed to write the novel, or love that person, to relive that dream, even decades later. The last time I thought about this book, this particular dream, and telling this version of the story—the one you're reading now, the one you just began—was almost twenty years ago, when I thought I could handle revealing what happened to me and a few of my friends at the beginning of our senior year at Buckley, in 1981. We were teenagers, superficially sophisticated children, who really knew nothing about how the world actually worked—we had the experience, I suppose, but we didn't have the meaning. At least not until something happened that moved us into a state of exalted understanding.

When I first sat down to write this novel, a year after the events had taken place, it turned out that I couldn't deal with revisiting this period, or any of those people I knew and the terrible things that befell us, including, most crucially, what had actually happened to me. In fact without even writing a word I shut the idea of the project down almost as soon as I began it—I was nineteen. Even without picking up a pen or sitting at my typewriter, only gently remembering what happened proved too unnerving in that moment and I was at a place in my life that didn't need the added stress and I forced myself to forget about that period, at least for a while, and it wasn't hard to erase the past in that moment. But the urge to write the book returned when I left New York after living there for over twenty

years—the East Coast was where I escaped almost immediately upon graduation, fleeing the trauma of my last year at high school—and found myself living back in Los Angeles, where those events from 1981 had taken place, and where I felt stronger, more resolved about the past, and that I was capable of steeling myself from the pain of it all and entering the dream. But this turned out not to be the case then either, and after typing up a few pages of notes about the events that happened in the autumn of 1981, when I thought I had numbed myself with half a bottle of Ocho in order to keep proceeding, letting the tequila stabilize my trembling hands, I experienced an anxiety attack so severe that it sent me to the emergency room at Cedars-Sinai in the middle of that night. If we want to connect the act of writing with the metaphor of romance then I had wanted to love this novel and it seemed to be finally offering itself to me and I was so tempted, but when it came time to consummate the relationship I found myself unable to fall into the dream.

—

THIS HAPPENED WHEN I WAS WRITING specifically about the Trawler—a serial killer who had been haunting the San Fernando Valley starting in the late spring of 1980 and then announcing their presence more strongly in the summer of 1981 and who was frighteningly somehow connected to us—and a wave of stress so severe crashed over me that night I began making notes I actually moaned with fear from the memories and I collapsed, retching up the tequila I'd been gulping down. Xanax I kept in the nightstand by my bed was no help—I swallowed three and knew they weren't going to do anything quickly enough. In that moment: I was sure I was about to die. I dialed 911 and told the operator I was having a heart attack and then fainted. The landline I was calling from—this was in 2006, I was forty-two, I lived alone—alerted them as to where the location was and an alarmed doorman from the front desk of the high-rise I lived in escorted the EMTs to the eleventh floor. My apartment was unlocked by the doorman and they found me on the floor in the bedroom. I regained consciousness in an ambulance as it sped along San Vicente Boulevard toward Cedars-Sinai, a short distance from the Doheny Plaza, where I lived, and after I was wheeled into the emergency room prone on a

stretcher and had reoriented myself as to what had happened, I became embarrassed—the Xanax had kicked in and I was calm and I knew there was nothing physically wrong with me. I knew the panic attack was directly related to the memories I had of the Trawler and more specifically of Robert Mallory.

A doctor checked me out—I was basically fine but the hospital wanted me to stay the night so they could perform a battery of tests, including running an MRI, and my primary physician agreed, reminding me over the phone that my health insurance would cover almost all of the stay. But I needed to get home and opted out of whatever tests they wanted to administer because if I had stayed at Cedars that night I was sure I'd slip into madness, knowing that what happened to me had nothing to do with my body or any malady I may or may not have harbored. It was a reaction simply connected to memory, to the past and conjuring that awful year—to Robert Mallory, and the Trawler, and Matt Kellner and Susan Reynolds and Thom Wright and Deborah Schaffer, as well as the darkened tunnel I was traveling through at seventeen.

—

AFTER THAT NIGHT I abandoned the project and instead wrote two other books during the following thirteen years, and it wasn't until 2020 that I felt I could begin *The Shards*, or *The Shards* had decided that *Bret* was ready because the book was announcing itself to *me*—and not the other way around. I hadn't reached out to the book because I spent so many years pushing myself away from the dream, from Robert Mallory, from that senior year at Buckley; so many decades spent pushing away from the Trawler, and Susan and Thom and Deborah and Ryan, and what happened to Matt Kellner; I had relegated this story to the dark corner of the closet and for many years this avoidance worked—I didn't pay as much attention to the book and it stopped calling out to me. But sometime during 2019 it began climbing its way back, pulsing with a life of its own, wanting to merge with me, expanding into my consciousness in such a persuasive way that I couldn't ignore it any longer—trying to ignore it had become a distraction. This particular timing had coincided with the fact that I wasn't writing screenplays anymore, that I had decided at a certain

point to stop chasing that game—a decade of being well compensated for TV pilots and scripts for movies that would mostly never be made—and I briefly wondered if there was a connection between the book beckoning to me and the new lack of interest in writing for Hollywood. It didn't matter: I had to write the book because I needed to resolve what happened—it was finally time.

—

THE SPARK FOR MY RENEWED INTEREST in the novel was initiated by a brief moment years after that anxiety attack landed me in Cedars. I'd seen a woman—I was going to say a girl, but she wasn't any longer; she was a woman in her mid-fifties, my age—on the corner of Holloway and La Cienega in West Hollywood. She was standing on the sidewalk outside the Palihouse Hotel, wearing sunglasses, a phone pressed against her ear, waiting for a car, and even though this was a much older version of the girl I used to know when we were in high school it was unmistakably her. I knew it even though I hadn't seen her in almost forty years: she was still effortlessly beautiful. I had just made a left turn onto Holloway and was stopped in traffic when I noticed the figure on the deserted sidewalk beneath the umbrella at the valet stand—she was maybe twenty feet away from me. Instead of the happy surprise at seeing an old friend I was frozen with a sheet of dread—it draped over me immediately and I went ice cold. That glimpse of this woman in the flesh caused the fear to return and it started swallowing everything—just like it had in 1981. She was a reminder that it had all been real, that the dream had actually happened, that even though four decades had passed since we last saw each other, we were still bound by the events of that fall.

I didn't suddenly pull over to the side of Holloway, near the mouth of the garage of the CVS across the street from the Palihouse, and present myself to the woman, exclaim surprise, get out of the car and offer her an embrace, marvel at how beautiful she still looked—I had successfully avoided contact with any of my classmates from our senior year on social media, with only a few having reached out to me over the years, usually in the weeks after I published a book. Instead I just stared through the windshield of the BMW I was driving as she stood on that deserted

sidewalk, holding the phone to her ear, listening to whoever was talking to her, not saying anything, and even with the sunglasses on, there was something haunted in the way she held herself, or maybe I was imagining this was true—maybe she was fine, maybe she had completely adjusted and had processed what happened to her in the fall of 1981, the terrible injury she suffered, the awful revelation she experienced, the losses she endured. I was on my way to Palm Springs with Todd, someone I'd met in 2010 and who'd been living with me for the past nine years, to spend a week with a friend flying in from New York who had rented a house on the edges of the movie colony in Palm Springs before heading to San Diego to attend a series of conferences. I'd been having a conversation with Todd when I saw the woman in front of the Palihouse and was shut down mid-sentence. A car suddenly blared its horn behind me and when I glanced at the rearview mirror I realized the light on Holloway had turned green and I wasn't moving. "What's wrong?" Todd asked as I accelerated too quickly and lurched toward Santa Monica Boulevard. I swallowed, and numbly offered, trying to sound utterly neutral: "I knew that girl..."

—

OF COURSE SHE WASN'T a girl any longer—again, she was almost fifty-five, as I was—but that was how I'd known her: a girl. It didn't matter. Todd just asked, "What girl?" and I made a vague distracted motion with my hand—"Just someone outside Palihouse." Todd craned his neck but didn't see anyone—she was already gone. He shrugged and looked back at his phone. I realized that the satellite radio was tuned to the Totally 80s station and the chorus from "Vienna" by Ultravox was playing—*It means nothing to me*, the singer cried out, *this means nothing to me*—as the fear kept swirling forward, a variation on that same fear from the fall of 1981, when we played this song near the end of every party or made sure of its prominence on every mixtape we compiled. Letting the song take me back on that December day, I thought I'd acquired the tools to cope with the events that happened when I was seventeen and I even thought, naïvely, foolishly, that I had worked it out through the trauma in the fiction I published years later, in my twenties and thirties and into my forties, but *that* specific trauma rushed back to me, proving that whatever I

thought I'd worked out on my own, without having to confess it in a novel, I obviously hadn't.

That week we were in the desert I couldn't sleep—perhaps a couple of hours each night at the most even with a steady intake of benzodiazepine. I might have knocked myself out with the Xanax I'd overdosed on but the black dreams kept me from sleeping for more than one or two hours, and I would lie awake exhausted in the master bedroom in the house on Azure Court combating the rising panic tied to the girl I had seen. The midlife crisis that began after that night in 2006 when I tried to write about what happened to us our senior year at Buckley, completed itself roughly seven years later—seven years spent in a fever dream where the free-floating anxiety alienated everyone I knew and the accompanying stress caused me to drop forty pounds—waned away with the help of a therapist, a kind of life coach whom I dutifully saw every week for a year in an office off Sawtelle Boulevard just a block past the 405 who was the only one out of half a dozen shrinks I'd seen not afraid of the things I was telling him. I had learned from the previous five therapists that I had to downplay the horror of what had happened—to me, to us—and that I had to rearrange the narrative so that it was more palatable in order not to disturb the sessions themselves.

I was finally in a long-term relationship and the minor problems that never actually threatened my life—addiction, depression—crept away. People who had been avoiding me those last seven years, when I was emaciated and furious, would run into the new Bret in a restaurant or at a screening and seemed confused when they saw I wasn't as freaked out and messed up as I used to be. And the prince-of-darkness literary persona readers thought I had always embodied was now vanishing, being replaced by something sunnier—the man who wrote *American Psycho* was actually, some people were surprised to find out, just an amiable mess, maybe even likable, and not nearly the careless nihilist so many people mistook me for, an image that I perhaps played along with anyway. But it had never been the intended pose.

SHE WAS STANDING across the street from a CVS pharmacy that used to be, decades ago, a New Wave roller-disco rink called Flipper's, and on the way out to Palm Springs the sight of the woman caused me to remember the last time I had been to Flipper's, in the spring of 1981, before Robert Mallory appeared that September and everything changed. I was with Thom Wright and two other guys from our class at Buckley, Jeff Taylor and Kyle Colson—we were four seventeen-year-old high-school students in the convertible Rolls-Royce of a mildly infamous but harmless gay con man in his early forties named Ron Levin who Jeff Taylor had introduced to the group, all of us a little wired from the cocaine we had done at Ron's condo in Beverly Hills earlier that evening. This was actually on a school night during the middle of our junior year and what this might suggest about our adolescence is, I suppose, open to interpretation. It also might suggest something about our world that Jeff, a handsome surfer who—after Thom Wright—was the second- or third-best-looking guy in our class, was supplying Ron Levin with mild sexual favors for cash even though Jeff was straight, most of it going to a new surfboard, stereo equipment and a weed supplier in Zuma.

It might also suggest something about our world that Ron Levin was murdered a few years later by two members of something called the Billionaire Boys Club—an investment and social group collective made up of many of the guys we vaguely knew from the private-school scene in Los Angeles, guys who went to the Harvard School for Boys, which, along with the Buckley School, was one of the two most prestigious private schools in Los Angeles, and students from both places often knew each other in the vaguely exclusive world of prep schools then. Later, I would meet the founder of the Billionaire Boys Club, a guy my age named Joe Hunt, during winter break from Bennington at a casual dinner with a few friends at La Scala Boutique in Beverly Hills in the months preceding Ron Levin's murder at the hands of BBC's security director that Joe ordered, and nothing about Joe Hunt, tall and handsome and quiet, ever suggested he would be capable of the crimes he was later imprisoned for.

I'm digressing because what happened to us that fall in 1981 had nothing to do with the Billionaire Boys Club or Ron Levin or Joe Hunt. This was just a segment of where the world we were a part of was heading

toward during that deep span of empire, and by the time the Billionaire Boys Club “happened” in 1983, what “happened” to us had already occurred, and it was perhaps the casually hedonistic world of adults we were eagerly entering that opened a door that allowed Robert Mallory and the Trawler and the events of that fall to greet us—it later seemed, at least to me, an invitation we thoughtlessly sent out completely unaware of the price we would end up paying.

—

FLIPPER’S LOOMED CLOSER on that spring night in Ron Levin’s convertible Rolls-Royce as we headed up La Cienega into West Hollywood from Beverly Hills, Donna Summer singing “Dim All the Lights” from the car’s stereo, off the eight-track of *Bad Girls*. Ron was driving and Jeff was in the passenger seat, Kyle and Thom and myself in the back, but I could see from where I was squeezed between Thom and Kyle that Ron’s hand was on Jeff’s thigh and then Jeff gently pushed Ron’s hand away without looking at him. Thom had leaned over and saw this after I nudged him and glanced at me with a shrug, rolling his eyes, whatever. Did the shrug imply that this was simply where we all were and we were okay with it? I wondered hopefully as I glanced back at Thom Wright. But we really didn’t care: we were high and young and it was a warm spring night and entering into the world of adults—nothing else mattered. This night in 1981 took place before a placid and beautiful summer in L.A.—the summer before the horror began, though we found out it had actually started *before* that summer, had already been unfolding in ways we weren’t aware—and that night, which I remember few specific details of, seems in retrospect like one of the last innocent nights of my life despite the fact that we should have never been there, underage and slightly high on cocaine and with a much older gay man who would be murdered three years later by one of our private-school peers.

I don’t remember roller-skating but I remember sitting in a booth drinking champagne, the *Xanadu* soundtrack blasting, and I remember that we went back to Ron’s apartment in Beverly Hills and Ron casually disappeared into the bedroom with Jeff—he wanted to show Jeff a new Rolex he’d just bought. Kyle drove back to his parents’ in Brentwood



while Thom and I did some more coke and played records (and I remember those records that night: Duran Duran, Billy Idol, Squeeze), before I eventually left, while Thom waited for Jeff, and after Ron passed out the two of them headed to Jeff's father's place in Malibu, where they stayed up the rest of the night and finished the half-gram Ron gave Jeff and hit the beach in their wet suits at dawn to surf the waves cresting along the misty morning shores before they put on their school uniforms and made the long drive to Buckley, taking Sunset all the way to Beverly Glen and then over the hill into Sherman Oaks. Hours earlier I had already driven through the canyons back to my parents' place on Mulholland, where I took a Valium I found in a Gucci pillbox—the pillbox a Christmas gift from Susan Reynolds when I was fifteen and maybe another clue about where we all were—before falling into an easy and dreamless sleep.

—

WE WERE SO autonomous at sixteen but it never seemed like it was to our youthful detriment, because the week you got your driver's license in L.A. was when you became an adult. I remember when Jeff Taylor first got his car before any of us and on a school night picked up Thom Wright in Beverly Hills and then dropped by the house on Mulholland to get me and then drove into Hollywood with the eight-track of Billy Joel's *Glass Houses* blasting "You May Be Right" and we went to see a late show of *Saturn 3* in a deserted Cinerama Dome—this was in February of 1980. I don't remember the movie—R-rated sci-fi starring Farrah Fawcett—only the freedom of being out on our own and without any parents involved. This was the first time we had driven by ourselves to see a ten o'clock movie and I remember hanging out in the vast parking lot of the Cinerama Dome as midnight neared, a deserted Hollywood surrounding us, sharing a joint, the future wide open.

It was not unusual after I got my driver's license to decide at seven o'clock on a Wednesday after browsing my homework that I would drive down the hill from the house on Mulholland and into West Hollywood to see the first set of the Psychedelic Furs at the Whisky without asking my mother's permission (my parents were separated by that point in 1980), because this had become a common weeknight out. I would just let my

mother know that I'd be back by midnight and then I'd slip out of the house and drive through the empty canyons with Missing Persons or the Doors playing and park in a lot off Sunset where I'd pay five dollars to the attendant on North Clark. I would easily get into the Whisky with a fake ID (some nights I wasn't even carded) and in the club I'd ask the Rastafarian by the bar if he knew where I could get any coke and the Rastafarian would usually point to a kid with platinum-blond hair in the back of the room, whom I'd walk over to and gesture at, slipping him a wad of folded cash before I ordered a whiskey sour, which was a drink I favored in high school, waiting for him as he checked something out in the manager's office and then brought me a small packet. Afterward I would drive up the canyons and then cruise along Mulholland—everything was deserted, I was high, smoking a clove cigarette—and descend Laurel Canyon and drive along the neighborhoods nestled above Ventura Boulevard: I'd start in Studio City and then glide through Sherman Oaks slowly in the darkness along Valley Vista until I arrived in Encino and then, past that, into Tarzana, just idly driving by the darkened houses that lined the suburban neighborhoods, listening to the Kings until it was time to head back up to Mulholland. I'd take either Ventura Boulevard or the 101 and at Van Nuys make the drive up Beverly Glen, and sometimes while heading home catch the green flashes from the eyes of coyotes in the glare of the headlights as they glanced at the Mercedes while trotting across Mulholland—sometimes in packs—and I'd have to stop the car, waiting to let them prowl past. And I could always manage the next morning, no matter how late my nights played out, to pull into the Buckley parking lot, neatly wearing my uniform, minutes before the first class began, never feeling hungover or tired but only pleasantly buzzed.

—

IF THE SPRING AND SUMMER of 1981 had been the dream, something paradisaical, then September represented the end of that dream with the arrival of Robert Mallory—there was now the sense of something *else* moving in, dark patterns were revealing themselves, and we began noticing things for the first time: a signal we had never heard before started calling out to us. I don't want to make a direct connection between

certain events and the arrival of Robert Mallory in September of 1981 after that paradisaical summer but it happened to coincide with a kind of madness that slowly descended over the city. It was as if another world was announcing itself, painting the one we had all safely taken for granted into a darker color.

For example, this became a time when homes in certain neighborhoods were suddenly being targeted and staked out by members of a cult whose purpose was hard to ascertain, the pale hippie hanging out at the end of the driveway muttering to himself, his pacing interrupted by a brief shuffle-dance, and later, in December, there were plastic explosives planted all over town by the cult the hippies belonged to. There was suddenly a sniper on the roof of a department store in Beverly Hills on the night before Thanksgiving, and there was a bomb threat that cleared out Chasen's on Christmas Eve. Suddenly we knew about a teenage boy who had convinced himself he was possessed by a "Satanic demon" in Pacific Palisades and the elaborate exorcism by two priests to rid the boy of the demon, which almost killed him—the boy bled from his eyes and went deaf in one ear, developed pancreatitis, and four ribs were broken during the ritual. Suddenly there was the UCLA student buried alive as a prank by five classmates high on PCP at a fraternity party that a witness blandly said had "somehow gotten out of hand" and who almost didn't make it, ending up in a coma in a darkened room in one of the buildings lining Medical Plaza. Suddenly there were the spider infestations that bloomed everywhere across the city. The most fanciful story that fall involved a mutation, a monster, a fish the size of a small car hauled out of the ocean off Malibu—its skin was gray-white and there were large patches of silvery-orange scales dusted across it and even though it had the jaws of a shark it decidedly wasn't one, and when the thing was gutted by local fishermen they found the bodies of two dogs who had been missing swallowed whole.

And then, of course, there was the Trawler announcing itself.

For about a year there had been various break-ins and assaults, and then disappearances, and in 1981, the corpse of a second missing teenage girl was found—the other one discovered in 1980—and was ultimately connected to the home invasions. Everything might have happened without

the presence of Robert Mallory but the fact that his arrival coincided with the strange darkening that had begun to lightly spiral into our lives was something I couldn't ignore, even though others did, at their own peril. Whether it was bad luck or bad timing these events were simply tied together, and though Robert Mallory wasn't the sniper on the roof of Neiman Marcus or the caller who emptied out Chasen's and he wasn't connected to the violent exorcism in Pacific Palisades or anywhere near the fraternity house in Westwood where the pledge had been flung into an open grave, his presence, for me, was connected to all of these things; every horror story we heard that fall, anything that darkened our bubble in ways we never noticed before, led to him.

—

A WEEK AGO I ordered a reproduction of the 1982 Buckley yearbook from a website called Classmates.com for ninety-nine dollars and it was FedExed four days later to the apartment on Doheny and when it arrived I remembered why I didn't have a copy: I never wanted to be reminded of the things that happened to me and the friends we lost. Our yearbook was called *Images*, and this edition was overseen by a classmate who became a well-known producer in Hollywood and she gave 1982 a cinematic theme: interspersed throughout the yearbook were stills of movies, everything from *Gone with the Wind* to *Ordinary People*, which seemed, in retrospect to what happened, almost unnaturally frivolous and uncaring, a way of forcing a lipstick smile onto a death mask. While slowly turning the pages of the "Seniors" section, where each of us had an individual page to reminisce and thank our parents and add photos of friends and quotations, designing the page to represent who we thought we were at eighteen, our best selves, I was haunted by the fact that out of the sixty seniors from that class of 1982 five were missing—the five who didn't make it for various reasons—and this fact was simply inescapable: I couldn't dream it away or pretend it wasn't true. We were listed alphabetically and after sipping from a tumbler of gin I would tentatively turn to where each of them would have been placed within those sixty pages and notice that they simply weren't there—they had all existed that first week in September but now they were