

Until the Dawn
by Alec Clayton

Excerpt from opening chapter

1982 SoHo

Painting can be an evil mistress. She can love you tender and she can love you raunchy, and she can rip your guts apart.

When you put that last stroke on your canvas and you know you've done it right, and you step back to look at what you've done, a deep sigh comes all the way up from your loins and you say "Yes! Yes, by God, I did it."

But it can also be like a cramp in the pit of your stomach that wrenches your intestines and won't let go; because to make a painting you have to reach deep down inside and pull it out, and when it doesn't come it's like the dry heaves. And the loneliness of it! The loneliness is unbearable. You're all alone in a huge loft and you're slinging paint with concentration so intense it's exhausting, and when you finally set your paint bucket down and step back to see what you've done there is not a soul to share that moment with, be it ecstasy or be it loathing; because you've experienced a rape or a battle or the most tender of caresses, and it was all between you and that goddamn canvas; and suddenly you get this memory flash from back when you were in art school and your professors ripped your work apart, and you look at your painting and you can't even see it. You haven't the slightest idea whether it's art or crap. So you grab the freight elevator down to the street and you walk to the corner bar and get gloriously drunk.

Red Warner wrote those words. He wrote them in that bold scrawl of his. He wrote them in his journal not long after his final exhibition and that now-famous party that ended with a scream and a mad rush of fleeing bodies, and Red Warner slumped on the floor in a pool of blood like the day's washing from a slaughterhouse.

He also wrote in that hallucinatory journal:

After that I went berserk, raving around town with Cassie at my heels trying valiantly to hold me back.

Time now expands and contracts. Memory and dreams and imaginings all become twisted like taffy in the hands of a madman. I'm sitting in a green aluminum boat on the bayou, recuperating. A dirty bandage. Warm beer, the taste of bile in my mouth. Confused memories. Brother Barnes in his black suit worn silver at the elbows, and wearing a white shirt and skinny black tie that cuts into his puffy, red neck like wire on a post, shouting, "Oh you vile generation of fornicators and blasphemers!" And I'm racing around the loft, swinging a butcher knife, and blood is gushing like gooey cadmium red squeezed from a tube, and the ceiling beams are swelling as if pumped with helium and they're swirling and swirling in a slow motion pool of crimson and black.

My comings and goings are like debris in a tornado all whirling and blowing and converging like the eye of the storm in a single moment and a single place. And Redneck Red Warner is the “I” of the storm when some two hundred or so idiots crowd into my loft. Whores and pimps off the avenue and leather boys from the West Side bars and a slew of artsy hangers-on, and some dame named Dianna wearing black lace undies and spike heels and nothing else. Couples of both sexes groping each other. Air dense with the smell of marijuana and cigarette smoke. Something snaps in my mind again, and again and again, and suddenly I’m standing on top of a table in the kitchen area, shouting words from the Book of Job in the Bible — words that I never remember reading. I’m standing in the pulpit, calling them sinners to repentance, shouting with a righteous rhythm and providing the A-mens my own self.

If in bed I say,

A-men!

When shall I arise?

I am filled with restlessness...

Filled with it, filled with it!

I am filled with restlessness until the dawn. My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle; they come to an end without hope. Remember that my life — My life, sweet Jesus — it is like the wind; I shall not see happiness again.

I jump off the table and grab a butcher knife from the counter and start weaving through the crowd, swinging the blade like a sword and screaming, “Scabs on humanity! Your days are numbered. Fornicators and liars, sucking off my fame and my talent.”

I rip my shirt off and fling it away.

The idiots applaud. They started ripping their own shirts. Tattered garments in the air.

“I rend my garments!” I scream, “I’m a weird, wacko, washed up fool who can't even put his queer shoulder to the wheel (borrowing from Ginsberg). I used to be a simple country boy from Mississippi, but my pecker got me in a mess of trouble.”

... And I raise the knife high over my head and shout...

I slammed the journal pages shut. I could not read the next sentence. I did not have to read any more to find out the next chapter in Red Warner's story, because I was there with him. One way or another I'd been with him all along.

I knew him when he was a kid, before he took the name Red, back when he was plain ol' Travis Earl Warner. We grew up together. We were close. I was with him from the first time he played hooky back in Church Street Elementary School until he graduated from Tupelo High and went off to study art at the Memphis Art Academy. But I was not with him when he was the only witness in a murder case and had to give testimony that would send one or another friend to

prison, and I was not with him when he fled Tupelo in shame. Later, when he became famous, I followed him from a distance, keeping up with his shenanigans through the art magazines and the stylish gossip rags. Finally, when he vanished after that last show and everyone was wondering whether he was dead or alive, I took it upon myself to find him — traveling to Tupelo to put the pieces together, talking to Mama Marybelle, trying to figure out what turned Travis Earl Warner into Red Warner, trying to figure out what made him freak out the way he did, and trying to figure out if he was still among the living (which I never really doubted) and if so, where he might have gone.

To tell his story right, I need to tell it the way I told it to Jimmy on that long drive from New York to Tupelo. I've got to start back before Travis and I were even born. I've got to tell about his grandfather, Rudy Sullivan and his mother, Marybelle, and the Warner family who more or less adopted Marybelle when she was carrying Travis in her womb.