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Scott Heim

THE DEATH OF ANTHONY PERKINS

Ten years old, summer vacation, the Motel 6. Our bathroom at home lacked a shower, and I lingered three times a day under needles of scalding Cincinnati water. "Hurry the hell up," my mother screamed at the door. Inside, I masturbated with suds from those fragrant bars of soap wrapped like tiny white chocolate bars. My fantasies substituted Janet Leigh's form from *Psycho* with my adolescent body. Norman Bates entered. The cloudy curtain ripped back. He dropped his knife and swept me into his chilly arms.

Horrified audiences squirm through the now-famous shower scene. On the soundtrack, Bernard Herrmann's screechy violins; the crescendo of knife penetrating muscle. The cinematic murder lasts a total of forty-five seconds, but "seems like an eternity," according to the lady in the aisle seat.

Purportedly informed of his hospital blood test, the *National Enquirer* reported Anthony Perkins was HIV positive before he even knew. In a cover photo, he appears gaunt and worried, a comma-shaped red stain on his shirt collar.

Halfway through my Columbia University creative writing course, I wrote the following prose poem:

Dinner With Norman

Ring, ring. You sandwich the phone between ear and shoulder. He whispers invitation, his voice surfacing from a connection that crackles like the curlicues of bacon you cover to hear him better. His words soothe like a mother's touch. You shower now to avoid it later. Greenbacks into socks and an underwear change: anticipating accident on that desert road. Across town, you plunk down a few twenties; cruise off top-down in a 50's sedan. The drive lasts two days. Heat and gritty wind. Shoddy motels lacking the quiet and persnickety spic-and-span of the Bates. Later, saguaros and yuccas

pose like sinister statues in the sand's bland gallery. Your chugging arrival seems filmic and deliberate: the VACANCY sign sizzles its neon wire in perfect synch with ravens that flap across the sunset. A coyote bawls. You sidestep Suites One through Ten and make a beeline for the house. Norm's mom relaxes in her upstairs window, silhouette not-rocking in the rocking chair. Front porch: creaky and freshly swept. Front door: creaky and unlocked. Stuffed swallows, budgies, and a great snowy owl follow your every move. Industrious N's preserved their shapes with chemicals and sawdust. Smells like these creep toward your nose, combined with those cheese sandwiches he modestly hinted he'd serve. Your heart pitter-patters. Somewhere upstairs, a floorboard snaps like a backbone. You touch the antique banister; begin the ascent.

Martin Balsam, who starred as Detective Arbogast: "Tony was ideal to work with. He was punctual, kind, a real professional. At that time, the role of Norman would have been risky for his career—Tony was a teen idol of sorts, and there he was playing a transvestite murderer. But the risk paid off, and the movie made him famous."

Coincidences. (1) For three years, my mother and I lived in a mansion-sized house on a hill. (2) Nights, she sat crocheting in her high-backed rocker. (3) We both loved toasted cheddar sandwiches. (4) As a toddler, I'd attempted taxidermy, gutting a dead bird and stuffing it with pebbles. (5) I dressed as Mom one Halloween.

"This time, Hitchcock goes too far . . . all this gratuitous violence, this shocking insistence on death."—movie review, 1960

My attractions always centered on dark attributes: hair, eyes, bushy eyebrows that connect above the nose. Anthony Perkins possessed all these. Even when the gray began snowing his temples, I still found him sexy.

Psycho II made two decades after the original, paled in comparison. The year was 1983, and I'd just joined "Skin Slaughter," my first punk band. The lead singer and I lounged in the front row, drugs simmering in our arteries and veins, the dyed spikes of our haircuts silhouetted on the screen like scorched weeds. In the only scene I remember, Vera Miles (as Lila Crane, sister to long-dead Marion)

snooped through the Bates basement, only to meet her doom via a knife bullseyeing her screaming mouth. Mark shook his stunned head. "She must have needed cash badly to accept that role."

Perkins himself directed *Psycho III*. I refused to see it, preferring instead to view the original again and again. Was there a fourth film? I don't recall.

The film's final shot. Insect lands on Norman's hand. 'Mother's' voice cackles, "I wouldn't even harm a fly." Hitchcock superimposes a grinning skull over Norman's face.

Pneumocystis carinii killed a friend of a friend, only one day after A.P.'s death. "Aids-related illness," said page 37 of the paper. I'd just read the same words thirty-four pages back. In the Perkins article, a photo showed Norman Bates discovering Marion Crane's body. When we left the funeral home, the clouds resembled taxidermied birds. I asked Kevin if his home had vacancy. We crawled into bed and held hands. I pushed my bootlegged copy of *Psycho* into the VCR. I wondered how many times his friend had seen it. At last count, my total was fifty-seven.