

Benjamin Heim Shepard

Illuminations on Market Street

a story about sex and estrangement,
AIDS and loss, and other preoccupations
in San Francisco

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Contents

Cast of Characters	9
A Word to the Reader	11
Part One The Coldest Winter Was a Summer	13
Walking the Toaster	15
San Francisco Streets.....	18
San Francisco Summers	20
Love Letters, Brief Connections.....	27
On Fisting and Friends	32
Part Two A High and Lonesome Feeling	37
In Terms of Sex.....	39
On Rita, Phil, Becky, and Todd.....	43
A Combination of the Sublime and the Apocalyptic.....	51
Stumbles and Separation	54
Morning Sunrise on Market Street	57
Reel Around the Fountain	61
The Unbearable Lightness of Lili.....	71
Part Three Southwest Towards Home	83
Tabula Rasa in San Francisco.....	85
Summer 1988.....	87
A Mysterious Domain	109
Earthquakes	134
Delicious Intoxication.....	141
Ciao Italia.....	145
Exile and the Kingdom.....	151
Closings and Openings in the City of Quartz	154
The Call	161

Part Four Down and Out in San Francisco.....	165
New Cycles and a Critical Mass	167
Eros and Thanatos in San Francisco	172
Clubland in MacArthur Park	180
White Nights	183
Boy Talk.....	188
Between Princeton and Home.....	193
Balkan Dreams	197
2:24 AM at Work	201
A Morning Bus Ride	204
A Tragic Sense of	210
Conversations with Toby	213
Dark and Light City	215
On Tweekers, Famines, and Femme Fatales	222
The Loss Exercise	231
To Lose the Earth You Know.....	237
First Glances.....	245
On the Stroll.....	248
Orgasm Addict in an Urban Brawl.....	256
Three Dates	259
Writing, Remembering, and Perfect Laughter	267
Pictures of Lily and Marcel Proust.....	270
On Betrayal.....	279
Dancing with Robert and Oblivion	282
Good Friday in the Castro.....	287
Made My Bed.....	291
In Ourselves.....	294
Dr. Carl.....	298
Grace	301
Last Dates	303
A Raymond Chandler Evening	308

Clueless	314
Acknowledgements and gratitude	319
About the Author.....	321

Cast of Characters

Amanda	— A friend of Cab's from the Inwood Theater summer job who dated one of the Peyote Cowboys and sleeps with Cab a few times
Becky	— A high school friend of Cab's from English class, with whom he gets mixed up in a sex panic
Bobby	— A college friend of Cab's who lives in Los Angeles but frequents San Francisco
Buck	— Chloe and Charles' friend from Vassar
Phil	— Becky's boyfriend, a hippy whose father works for the Dallas Cowboys
Cab	— Protagonist
Charles	— Cab's best friend in San Francisco
Chloe	— The femme fatale of Cab's college years
Chris	— A housemate with Mimi. For a brief while there, Cab dates Chris, his first girlfriend in San Francisco.
Daisy	— One of Cab's friends from high school
Deg. Andy, Jade	— Cab's friends from the Inwood Theater summer job of '88
David	— An accountant Cab befriends in San Francisco
Elizabeth	— A San Francisco sex researcher who Cab dates briefly
Grant	— Cab's best friend from high school
Jasmin	— A never-never girlfriend Cab keeps meeting
Jim	— Cab's coworker in San Francisco
Juan	— A resident at 1994 Market Street, with a dark, occasionally Christian sensibility
Julie	— Cab's muse in San Francisco, who he meets at the gym
Kirk	— A friend of Buck, Cab, and Charles from Vassar
Kurt	— Sue's roommate in San Francisco
Lili	— Cab's girlfriend senior year in high school
Louie	— Friend of Cab's from high school
Lucy	— A college friend who Cab dates and discusses LBJ and Queen with
Louisa	— Chloe's best friend from Duncanville Tx
Marsha	— Cab's girlfriend spring of freshman year in college
Marchello	— Italian exchange student who lives at Cab's house in high school
Marni	— An artful senior and subject of Cab's adoration freshman year in high school
Marsha	— Cab's girlfriend freshman year in college
Mimi and Chris	— Southern expatriots who share their home every Wednesday with Cab and their roommates Brad and Trish
Natalie	— Cab's old suitemate who used to date Bobby
Pedro	— A resident at 1994 Market Street, who Cab confides in and learns from

Peter	— Cab's younger brother
Raymond	— Cab's roommate on Page Street
Raoul	— Cab's boss at work
Rebecca	— Cab's editor at SOMA Magazine
Rick	— A high school friend from the football team, who Cabs stays in touch with
Sarah	— A bass player Cab briefly dates senior year in high school
Sue	— A waitress Cab meets in a café after a Critical Mass bike ride in San Francisco
Scudder	— Charles' roommate in San Francisco who he knows from Vassar
Ted	— Chloe's former lover who works with Cab at Massimo's
Tessa	— A friend who Cab dates a bit in college, staying in touch in San Francisco
Terri	— A resident at 1994 Market Street who owns a toaster named Frankie
Todd	— A friend of Cab's from high school
Tommy	— A high school friend of Cab's, Lili's former boyfriend
Willy	— A gay porno star living with AIDS who Cab gets to know at work

A Word to the Reader

Illuminations is a bildungsroman in four parts, built of overlapping layers of stories. Each section can be read separately or as a whole. The first and last sections, Parts I, II, and IV, take you to a world in which people are dying because they have had sex or injected drugs. They trace a story about AIDS and losses in pre-protease San Francisco. Eros still hangs in the air as hope for something good, something regenerative in the universe.

In the midst of this we find a familiar tale of a young writer, Cab, who pens his way through it all during graveyard shifts at an AIDS housing program, dashing notes about being dumped, the goings on of the people he knows, and watching the slow-motion car wreck as people live and die. Everyone has a story in San Francisco, except Cab, who feels as if he is merely a scribe to the sagas of those around him. In turn, he starts excavating his past. That story leads to the stories of similar misconduct, flirtations, losses, punk rock shows, girls with purple hair, infatuations, and indiscretions. All the while, he hears his friends tales of the city, of AIDS and death, Eros and Thanatos, and gets lost in their stories, trying to make sense of the random kindness, as well as the wreckage around him. Everyone has a story and a past, which in the times of plagues have lethal consequences. But why do some live and some die?

Parts I, II, and III trace Cab's narrative of being a young man unsuccessfully letting go of his Southern childhood, of sex, football, Texan lunacy, and a jigger of racism, mixed into a gumbo of irreconcilable memories and misgivings. Throughout this, the phobias of the past which ineffably haunt the country, linger in the way the world beyond him deals with AIDS.

So reader, if a coming of age tale holds little appeal, read Part I, parts of II, skim through III, and make your way back into the war zone of AIDS carnage in Part IV. But, if looking homeward with angels and narratives of growing up is your inclination, read from beginning to end, as the first three parts of the story lead us along a road trip from California to Texas, up to New York, by way of the Mississippi Sound and New Orleans, to Italy, back to Los Angeles, through riots, and a trip up Highway One to San Francisco as layers of this story converge and Cab searches for his story.