

'It made me laugh more than any other book this year'

Nick Hornby

The FINANCIAL
LIVES *of the*
POETS



JESS WALTER



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The Financial Lives of the Poets
by
Jess Walter

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CHAPTER I

Another 7/11

—**H**ERE THEY ARE AGAIN—the bent boys, baked
and buzzed boys, wasted, red-eyed, dry-mouth
high boys, coursing narrow bright aisles
hunting food as fried as they are, twitchy
hands wadding bills they spill
on the counter, so pleased and so
proud, as if they're the very
inventors of stoned—

And behind the counter, the ever-patient Rahjiv makes half-lidded eye contact with me as he rings up another patchouli-foul giggler—Reese's Pieces, Pic-6 Lotto, Red Bull and a cheddar-jack tacquito—Rahjiv probably thinking: *These kids, eh Matt*—or maybe not, because Rahjiv doesn't know my name and I don't wear a nametag. I'm just the middle-aged guy who leaves my gun-metal sedan running when I come in after midnight. When I can't sleep. And I've forgotten to get milk at a regular store. Milk for the kids' cereal. In the morning. Before school.

The milk is like nine dollars a gallon.

For years, recent immigrants like Rahjiv have been a political Rorschach: see turban, think terrorist and you're a Red 'Merican. Assume Indian neurosurgeon fluent in five languages, stuck serving morons at midnight for minimum wage, and you're Blue, like me. Of course I have no more proof that Rahjiv was a doctor in Delhi than some Texas trucker does that he's a bomber. Rahjiv may have jockeyed a 7/11 in India too for all we know—so impeccable is he with change, effortlessly plastic-bagging Hostess Sno Balls and Little Debbies, Power Bars and Mountain Dew—“No wait . . . dude. Chocolate milk! And pork rinds”—as yet another stoner reassesses the aisles—“And ooh, ooh! Cool Ranch Doritos!”

Whenever I come in here, I invariably think of my own boys, at home asleep in their beds, still a few years from such trouble (or do they already dream of midnight at the Slurpee machine?).

Two tattooed white kids in silk sweat suits step to the line behind me and I tense a little, double-pat my wallet. The fat one juggles a half-rack of malt-liquor forties while his partner rolls away to yell in his cell, “Chulo! Don' do shit 'til we get there, yo.” The door closes behind the cell-phoned gangbanger and I'm finally at the front of this line with my milk—“Hey Rahjiv”—when something goes terribly wrong at the soda fountain and the clerk and I turn together, drawn by a hydroponic squeal from deep inside the cave of a blue hoody. A pierced, lank-haired skater, board strapped to his back, has spilled his 72-ounce Sprite and now believes it is . . . *the funniest . . . fucking . . . thing . . . in the world*, and Rahjiv nods wearily at me again, no doubt wishing he were back cutting craniums at Mumbai General. He casually swings my jug past the scanner.

Then he hands me my milk. For the boys. For their cereal. In the morning.

It's like nine dollars a gallon.

I also think of my mother when I come in here. She was dying several years back and became obsessed with the terrorist attacks in New York. I hated that she should be so wracked with random anxieties as she wasted away, thumb jacking the morphine pump like it could save her life—it couldn't—her fear of dying manifested as a fear of things she had no reason to fear anymore: random crime, global warming . . . and most of all, terrorists on airplanes. "Matt?" she asked right before she died, "Do you think there will be another 7/11?" I thought about correcting her, but I just said, "No, Mom, there won't be any more 7/11s."

"Nice slippers, yo," says the cell-phone banger when I come outside with my milk. He's twenty or so, in a sagging shark-colored tracksuit, black hair combed straight over his ears, elaborate tattoo rising out of his shirt at the base of his neck. And right out in the open, in front of this convenience store, he conveniently offers me a hit on a glass blunt, a little marijuana pipe shaped like a cigarette. I wave it off, but sort of wish I hadn't—it's been at least fifteen years, but I didn't just spring from some relaxed-waisted suburbia with a Stoli martini in hand; I had my moments. In college they used to call me *Weedeater* because I devoured those Acapulco Gold joints, incense burning, black light on the walls, Pink Floyd thrumming down the dorm floor—

Oh, and they're not technically "slippers," but a casual loafer I got at the Nordstrom Rack with a gift certificate when I returned a cardigan that made me look like my grandfather. Of course I don't tell the stoned kid that, I just smile and say, "No thanks," but then I pause to get a closer look, instead of continuing on to my car. Maybe I'm just curious about this clever pipe or maybe it's the smell of the weed or maybe it's just this swiveling looseness I'm feeling, but I'm still in mid-pause when the fatter white gangster joins us, flat-brimmed ball cap worn sidesaddle, and now there are three of us standing in a little semicircle, as if waiting for a tee time.

“Hey,” says the one with the neck tattoo and the blunt, “dude here can give us a ride to the party.”

And I’m about to say I can’t give them a ride because I’ve got to get home (and they look mildly dangerous) when fat-in-the-hat says, “Thanks, man,” like he’s surprised I’d be so cool and suddenly I want to be that cool. And then the fat kid looks down at my hands, and laughs.

“Damn, man. Why you buy your milk here? Shit’s like nine dollars a gallon.”

The clouds are low, like a drop ceiling suffused with light from the city. They slide silently overhead. And two dope-smoking bangers in tracksuits climb into my car.

I read once that we can only fear what we’re already afraid of; that our deepest fears are the memory of some earlier, unbearable fear. If that’s true, then maybe it’s a good thing my mother never lived to see another 7/11.

“This a nice ride.”

“Thanks.”

“Seats heated?”

“Mmm.”

“Feels funny. Like I pissed my pants.”

“You pro’ly did piss your pants, yo.”

“I’ll turn it down.”

“What kind-a-car is this?”

“Nissan. Maxima.”

“How much ’at set you back?”

“Oh. Not much.”

But this isn’t true. With the winter floor mats, taxes and redundant two-year service contract, the car set me back \$31,256. And because of several other recent *setbacks*—missed payments, ensuing penalties, house refi’s, debt consolidations, various family crises and my untimely job loss—after two years of payments I still

somehow owe \$31,000. On a car worth eighteen. This is my life now: set as far back as it will go.

“My brother boosted a Maxima once,” says the kid from the backseat. “Or an Altima. I can’t keep ’em straight.”

Car thieves. Nice.

The criminals’ names are Skeet and Jamie. “Jamie?” I ask the kid in front.

“Yeah right, no shit, huh?” says Skeet from the backseat. “Dude’s got like a chick’s name, don’t he?”

“Eat me, Skeet,” Jamie says, and he offers me the blunt again and I surprise myself by taking it this time; I just want the smallest taste of that sweet smoke, or maybe I want to make sure they haven’t done anything new to the pot. . . .

Oh, but they *have*!

I suppress a cough. Nose runs. Eyes burn. Someone is composting leaves in my throat. Scraping my lungs with a shovel. Wow.

“Good, huh?” asks Jamie.

I hack: “Not bad.”

“Shit’s designer. Like three hunderd an ounce,” Skeet says.

The next roll of coughs I can’t suppress. “Really?”

“Definitely,” Jamie explains, voice lilting with excitement. “In this lab in British Columbia? This Nobel Prize dude? He Frankensteined that shit? It’s knock-off, but shit’s still pretty good. They can do whatever they want to it, you know? Make it do a thousand different things to your mind, yo.”

And I think that must be true, because a couple of old dorm-floor hits later my brain springs a leak and my life seems to trickle out, as I tell Jamie and Skeet my whole story: how I left a good job as a business reporter two years ago to start an unlikely poetry-and-investment website, how we got buried in the housing collapse just as my senile father moved in, how I scrambled back to my old newspaper job, only to get laid off eight weeks ago. How I got

fourteen weeks of severance from the paper, and have six weeks left to find a job, because fourteen minus eight is six. How last week it was seven, next week it will be five, but right now,

at this moment,
with Skeet in the backseat
and Jamie in front,
right now, as of this . . . very
moment—and I hold the smoke
in my chest as if I can make
this moment forever—Hooooo—

“It’s six. Six weeks.”

And that’s not even my most pressing deadline; I have all of seven days to liquidate my retirement and pay off a \$30,000 balloon payment to the mortgage company, or risk losing our house. And it is this second deadline, I tell the boys, that has given my job search such throat-constricting immediacy, as I worry over thinning want ads, shakily fill out applications and hope my references still have the positions I’ve listed on my résumé, and how—this part has just occurred to me—I’ve gone and *added another stress* to a very shitty situation, because “Even if I do somehow get a job interview now, they’ll probably make me take a—”

“—drug test!” Skeet yells from the backseat, and he laughs and I laugh and he laughs and I stop laughing and he keeps laughing.

“Don’t freak, Slippers,” Jamie says, “there’s a million ways to beat a piss test.”

“Pecans,” says Skeet from the backseat.

“Pecans?” Jamie turns back.

“Didn’t I read about some kind-a pecan diet in *O*?”

“How the fuck I know what you read? An’ what the fuck Oprah be writin’ about how to pass a drug test?”

“Dude, Oprah don’t write *O*. She just own that shit.”

“And what the fuck you be doin’ readin’ *it*?”

“My moms reads that shit, yo. . . . An’ I don’t know, maybe it was in *People*.”

“So what the fuck the pecans do?”

“The fuck I’m supposed to know what the pecans do! Clean up your piss or somefin’.”

“You crazy, motherfucker.”

“You crazy.”

“You crazy.”

“You crazy.”

“You so crazy you took the short bus to school.”

“You *know* that shit was behavioral, yo.”

And I must be high because this conversation makes sense.

Jamie waves Skeet off and faces forward again. “Don’t listen to that shit, Slippers. Here’s all you gotta do for that piss test. Get some of them pills. You know, online?”

Not you too, Jamie. Don’t fall for the online lie—that everything we need is available at the click of a keystroke: all that shimmering data, the dating habits of the famous, videos of fat people falling down, porn . . . investment poetry . . . job listings, foreclosure information, poverty advice . . . and what about the thing my wife has begun seeking online?

But before I get too deep into a new round of self-pity, Jamie offers a lilting anecdote: “You could do what my cousin Marshall did? Fucker wore a catheter? Connected to a baggy? With some other dude’s piss in it? And now he screens luggage at the airport? And he’s up for a supervisor job with the NTSA? And a security clearance? I shit you not, Dude’s got someone who warns him about random tests, and he keeps that catheter full of someone else’s whiz right there in his locker? And when he hears about tests, dude loads that shit up.”

In the rearview, I see Skeet drink directly from my milk carton.

Hey. That was like nine dollars a gallon.

Very good pot. Far better than the dusty brown ragweed we smoked in college. And I think of my mother again, and the trouble we had at Christmas break my freshman year when she was doing laundry and found a single joint amid the pennies and pocket lint of my 501's—she hated the sound of change rattling in her dryer—and I tried to convince her it was a rolled up note from a friend and she asked if I thought she was stupid and I said *No*, even though I was eighteen so of course my mother was stupid, and my parents were still together then but she *never told my father* about the joint, and I feel awful about her being so decent when I was such a shit; I feel awful for everything I did and everything I didn't do, and I miss her terribly, although it's probably good she's not here because I couldn't bear for her to hear about Jamie's cousin Marshall screening bags . . . peeing someone else's piss as he watches for shoe bombs and keeps us safe from the dudes planning another 7/11.

No, it's exceptional pot—

And the party . . . is not a party the way I remember parties but eight young guys, short and fat and tall and lean, black, brown, white, rejected Abercrombie models standing in a flower bed outside an apartment building across from a closed pizza place, smoking and laughing and drinking malt-liquor forties, talking in likes and shits and dudes, and I fit in fine, although I can't remember when I gave Skeet my slippers—but he's wearing them, dude drinking from my milk jug—and I'm in my socks, sucking that blunt like a scuba diver on an air hose as I track conversations that mean nothing to me: music I've never heard, and “skank-ass trippy chicks” I don't know, someone's “bus'-up ride”—and I gather from these conversations that my new friends are between nineteen and twenty-two, have a few community college credits,

some minimum-wagey part-timey jobs, a possession charge or five, and I think about the semicircle that I used to make with the old neck-tied newspaper hacks in the newsroom around the 5 p.m. TV news, arms crossed, talking in our own code about our wives and our cars, about flacks and blogs and the Dow, and I think maybe the world is made up of little circles like this one and that one, that maybe there's no fundamental difference between the circles except the codes for the shared bits of data, that somewhere a pack of plotting terrorists is standing in their own little circle, bouncing on cold feet and ululating not about the great American devil but about Ahmed's skank-ass trippy girlfriend and Mahmoud's bus' ride, and that's when I picture *my boys* again, one day standing in their own circle, generational losers smoking ever-improving weed and talking about their loser dad who went in the tank after getting run in the Great Recession or whatever they'll call it in the history books, or the *history MP3 files* and Christ, I'm only forty-six . . . I don't want to entertain such *grandpa-thought*, but I feel so old, so unemployed, outdated, dead technology, impotent scrap-heap, unraveling, unraveling, unrav—

“Wait,” one of the felons interrupts my time-dilated self-pity; it's tattoo-necked Jamie, the reliable one, quiet leader, and he leans in close: “Dude! Aren't you . . . like. *Starving?*”

And the thing is, bouncing on soaked socked feet outside this apartment building, blowing on cold hands that seem to belong to someone else, thinking of my sons at home in bed and the many ways I can still let them down, it's true—

Yes! I am so! Starving!
 But maybe we're all starving
 hungry for the warm lights
 and tight aisles of nacho-corn-
 sour-cream-onion-and-chive-

barbecue-goodness—and again
I drive my boys, Skeet and Jamie

—And I’m hypnotized by the set of cat-eyed taillights I’m ordered to follow as we arrive—because where else can you find the hungry, a community of the hungry—you tail the dude in the tricked-out Festiva—*damn he drive well*—and that smell? *Dude!* says Jamie, and Skeet laughs proudly and Jamie says, *Lay off the milk, Skeet!* and I crack with laughter as Jamie explains, *Dude’s lactose-infuckin’tolerant yo*—to the flat green and orange stripes—the sheer hot white light goodness of . . .

. . . another 7/11. And here I am, just like my mother feared, stoned off my nut, unemployed, a week from losing my house and maybe my wife and kids, and I file in with my new friends, as per—(1) banger in sweats (2) dude in baggie jeans (3) kid in hoodie (4) another banger in sweats (and my slippers) and finally (5) middle-aged unemployed man in Chinos, pea coat, golf shirt and wet socks—and *yes, Mom, in a perfect world*, we could find an open grocery, but there are simply going to be times when you must go out in the world, into the dark uneasy dangerous places and so I go. . . .

Straight to the freezer case and a siren of a meat-and-bean burrito which I tear into, unwrap and microwave—bouncing in squishy socks, watching that thing turn under the light like baby Jesus in an incubator—and that’s when Skeet freaks, he completely freaks! loses it! “Turn it off, man! That shit’s poison, man! They’re nukin’ us with that shit, turning us into radiated zombies!” Jamie trying to calm the poor kid through gritted teeth, “Chill, man,” but Skeet won’t chill, he just screams and points at the humming microwave oven as the clerk, this store’s Rahjiv yells: “Get that trippin’ guy outta here before I call the cops!” And everyone’s yell-

ing, “Chill, man, chill!” and “What else he on?” and “He always be trippin, yo!” and “Don’t call the cops, dude’s on probation!”

And that’s when I remember: *I am an adult* and I can do . . . something . . . I can fix this, protect my boys, make the world okay, and so I grab Skeet by his round shoulders and feel his racing heart, catch his sketchy eyes and say—

“Skeet. Look at me. It’s not nuclear radiation. It’s just waves. Like sound waves,” my voice getting softer, slower: “Tiny . . . waves.” A deep breath. “Like good vibrations, right? That’s why they call them micro . . . waves. See?” And he’s still breathing heavily when I nod and the microwave beeps, and Skeet looks over, still panting. And it’s quiet in the store.

After a second, Skeet nods back. Smiles. It’s gonna be. Okay.

And I pat Skeet’s shoulder, grab my steaming burrito and get in line to pay—take my place with the starving and the sorry, the paranoid, yawning with fear, the hungry lonely lost children let down by their unemployed fathers, men zapped by history’s microwave, a generation of hapless, luckless, feckless fathers with no idea how to fix anything, no clue what to do except go home to face the incubated babies staring at their dry bowls of Crispix and confess—

—*Sorry. But Skeet drank all the milk . . . right before he freaked—*

Oh, I am such a shit father, shit husband, shit son, shit human being . . . and I’ve lost my shit job, am losing my shit house, am at the bottom of my shit-self when I glance over at the endless wet roll of the Slurpee machine and it’s instantly hypnotic—

Banana-blackraspberry-cherryCoke-piñacolada! So peaceful. Around and around it swirls and I could watch the wet blend of flavors forever—when Jamie sidles up and whispers, “I’m gonna mix ‘em all, man,” like a soldier volunteering for a suicide mission.

“Go with God,” I whisper, and Jamie does, straight to a piña-

colada icy blur, and then down the line, cherry Coke, black raspberry, and he smiles back, and I'm insanely proud as I step forward to pay for my burrito, eyes falling on the clerk's wristwatch when . . .

for just a second . . . I can't tell . . . if I've forgotten . . . what the numbers mean, or maybe . . . I'm just imagining . . . what it would be like . . . to forget what they mean . . .

I spend days staring at this guy's watch before the second hand finally moves—and the position of the hands against the little numbers correlates to a memory of how this particular mechanism works (a memory from kindergarten: Miss Bean in go-go boots standing above me moving the hands of a sun-faced clock)—and I connect the relation of these symbols to a system of tracking the movement of the earth around the sun as across a forest of synapses there sparks a pattern of theoretical constructs (time, space, go-go boots) flaring into an evolutionary fire that represents a near miracle of abstract comprehension, an Einsteinian leap of cognition: *It is four-thirty in the morning.* That means I can still make it home to watch my boys' last hour of sleep.

And in my mind, the Nissan Maxima of my responsibilities follows the Ford Festiva of my unraveling into *this* convenience store of realization:

Hey!

This is where they sell more milk!

But that shit's like nine dollars a gallon.

Outside the store, Skeet and Jamie go off with the dude in the Festiva and I wave goodbye with my new white jug and I am in love with the predawn cool black, in love with my boys, in love with two percent.

The drive home is glorious—streetlight rollers like tide at dawn.

I blow laughter through my nose. Key in quietly. Like I'm

sixteen again. My old senile father is asleep on the hide-a-bed in the living room, TV still on ESPN. This is what we were watching together when I left to get milk . . . almost four hours ago. Dad doesn't stir. I try to take the remote control from him but he's holding it against his cheek like a security blanket, so I turn off the set manually, old school. Every day now they show the top ten sports plays of the day—and I think: what if life was like this, and at bedtime we got to see our own daily highlights (No. 4: Skeet freaks over the microwave).

Lug my jug to the kitchen, milk in the door of the fridge—the food inside is also glorious: cheese stick, martini olives—*chomp, chomp*—I eat shark-like, without conscience, hover upstairs to find Lisa in bed, tousled short hair clinging to the pillow. My wife, she is cute—everyone says so, but lately that word has carried a kind of accusing overtone, as if there might be something unsettling about a grown woman who retains her cuteness well into her forties; and maybe that's our problem, maybe Lisa is *too* cute, curled up in her cute little ball, cute back to the profoundly un-cute space where I'm not sleeping. Her cute cell phone on her nightstand, where she no doubt set it after TM-ing her old flame . . . and I toy with waking her, begging for a little marital goodness—*smack, smack*—maybe we can fix this thing the way we fixed problems when we were twenty-seven, but we're in a smack-smack dry spell, and according to an online chat of hers that I reconned earlier, she's not a big Matt fan these days. Anyway, this might not be the best time to win my cute wife back, given my B.C. bud-and-burrito breath, and the fact that I haven't told her that we could lose the house as early as next week. (I imagine breaking it to her as we fire a couple off—*Yes, yes, yes! Uh-uh! That-feels-so-good-we're-about-to-be-evicted!*)

So I step back into the hall; the boys' rooms are across from one another, and I stand between them, fists on my hips. Sentry.

Superhero. All I want is to keep them safe, healthy, fed. But with no job? No prospects? No money? No house? What did the man say—*There is always hope, but not for us*. Mouth dry. Head weighs eighty pounds.

I look around at *my house*—for a while anyway—before it begins its journey back to Providential Equity, or whatever company buys the company that bought the company that bought the bundle of red bills in which ours is bundled. Or is that more melodrama, mere self-pity? (They don't just *take* your house. They want you to pay. You're just the sort of homeowner they want. They'll do whatever they can to keep you here.) No, all I have to do is liquidate, get some money together, show good faith, get someone from the mortgage lender on the phone and convince them we need a little more time . . . that's all . . . a month . . . what's one month . . . a single month for a journalist in his mid-forties . . . to find a job . . . during a recession . . . with newspapers failing faster than investment banks.

I slump against the wall, played out. Who am I kidding? I can't save anyone. Maybe Skeet's right. Maybe they *are* irradiating us; maybe we're dead already. Mom knew it, that there would always be another 7/11. And suddenly I understand her fear of terrorism wasn't fear *for herself*. She wasn't flying on any more airplanes. She was afraid for me, afraid for her kids and her grandkids, for all the hungry, lost boys. Afraid for the world she knew she was leaving. As she lay there dying, she must have realized there was nothing she could do anymore to protect the people she loved. Just as there's nothing I can do for my boys anymore, my boys who will one day freak out alone in the tight warm aisles of a world beyond their understanding. I may as well be dead for all the help I can be to them. (My boys stir, agreeing that it's their scary world now, their hard, hard world: *go on, old man; rest now; sleep*.) And in my fraying head there plays a news medley of war and instability, financial collapse

and bad schools; forbearance, foreclosure, eviction; cynicism, climate crisis, 7/11—and the melody switches to my personal theme song (*Concerto of Failure and Regret in E minor*) as the life bleeds out from my feet and puddles in the hallway. . . .

And this is when the unlikeliest peace comes, and I smile. Because as fucked as the world is, as grim as the future surely seems to be, as grim as it revealed itself to be for my mother as she lay dying of the tumor that kills us all, there is a truth I cannot deny, a thing no creditor can take; even as my doomed boys stir in the cold unknowing of predawn sleep, even as the very life leaches out of me, soaks into the berber, into the cracks of my arid grave, I must grudgingly admit—

—that was one great goddamn burrito.