

VANITY FAIR

LOVELORN

The Golden Suicides

When Theresa Duncan, 40, took her own life on July 10, followed a week later by her boyfriend, Jeremy Blake, 35, their friends were stunned and the press was fascinated: what had destroyed this glamorous couple, stars of New York's multi-media art world, still madly in love after 12 years?

BY NANCY JO SALES

JANUARY 2008



Jeremy Blake and Theresa Duncan, who shared an uncommonly close bond. *Photograph by Bret Haller.*

On a rainy October night in Washington, D.C., the friends and family of Jeremy Blake gathered for a private memorial service at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Blake, an art-world star

acclaimed for his lush and moody “moving paintings,” shape-shifting innovations mixing abstract painting and digital film, had ended his life on the night of July 17, walking into the Atlantic Ocean off Rockaway Beach, Queens, never to return.

“I am going to join the lovely Theresa,” Blake, 35, had written on the back of a business card, which he left on the beach, along with his clothes. Police helicopters searched for him for days on the chance he might still be alive. Friends prayed that he was, talking of how his passport was missing, he had bought a ticket to Germany. Then on July 22, a fisherman found his body floating 4.5 miles off Sea Girt, New Jersey.

“The lovely Theresa” was Theresa Duncan, a writer, filmmaker, computer-game creator, and Blake’s girlfriend of 12 years. He had found her lifeless body on July 10, in the rectory of St. Mark’s Church in Manhattan’s East Village, where the couple had been renting an apartment. There was a bowl full of Benadryl pills, a bottle of Tylenol PM, and a champagne glass on the nightstand. There was a note saying, “I love all of you.” Duncan was 40. The last post on her blog, “The Wit of the Staircase,” was a quote from author Reynolds Price about the human need for storytelling and the impossibility of surviving in silence.

No one who spoke at Blake’s memorial service that evening at the Corcoran said anything about Theresa Duncan. Almost no one mentioned her name. (It happened to be her birthday, October 26.) No one talked about the dark stories and wild speculation that had emerged after news of the couple’s “double suicide” hit the media. There had been reports they had become “paranoid,” obsessed with conspiracy theories, believing they were being harassed by Scientologists. The Internet filled up with conjecture about government plots and murder. Something about their story seemed to capture the modern imagination, if only because no one knew exactly why two such accomplished and attractive people had chosen to make their exit.

Only Blake’s mother, Anne Schwartz Delibert, ventured near the controversy, saying from onstage that “Jeremy didn’t die from love, but of pain, and an inability to find a way out of it.” In a slide show going on behind her, a blond, mustachioed man could be seen holding Blake as a baby. It was his father, who died of aids when Blake was 17, but she never named him.

No one told the love story of Theresa and Jeremy. They remembered Blake’s handsome face, his style, his cool, his artistic originality. “He invented something new,” said his gallerist, Lance Kinz, of Kinz, Tillou and Feigen in New York. The slide show shuffled forward with scenes of Blake’s solidly suburban childhood in Takoma Park, Maryland. There he was as a gawky teenager, drawing, and as the impossibly suave and perceptive-looking young man he was to become. And then, finally, there was Theresa Duncan.

“Lovely” didn’t seem strong enough a word. Maybe gorgeous, sexy, charismatic. With her streaky blond hair and effortless chic, she looked like a 60s movie icon. Her intensity seemed to jump from the screen with a howl at the way no one was talking about her. How could you talk about Jeremy without talking about Theresa?

“They were remarkable people,” said David Ross, former director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. “I can’t think of one without the other. It was flattering to be in their presence. You felt good that they liked you.”

There were Theresa and Jeremy, arms wrapped around each other, staring into each other’s eyes. They looked as if they shared a secret, one of those cosmic kinds of love. But as the snapshots traveled forward, following them from Washington to Los Angeles to New York, they began to look unhappier, brooding, worried, tired.

“In the summer of 2006, I saw my brother for the first time in years,” said Blake’s 18-year-old sister, Adrienne, crying, “and I could tell he was completely different from what he had been. It frightened me.”

In their final days in New York, Blake and Duncan would seek refuge from the demons they believed were chasing them in the company of a radical Episcopalian priest, Frank Morales. Morales became one of their closest friends and confidants. He is also my ex-husband. We were married in 2004 and separated in 2006, a few months before he met the couple. The day after Jeremy Blake disappeared, Frank showed up at my door. He was visibly upset and said he wanted to talk. “What about?” I asked. I hadn’t seen him in months. He started to tell me the story. “He slipped through our fingers,” Frank said of Blake.

Meltdown

In a letter dated August 9, 2006, Blake and Duncan’s landlord in Venice, California, Sabrina Schiller, informed them that they had to move out. The neighbors on either side of their quaint Craftsman bungalow had told her, Schiller said, that they were “determined to seek police protection if necessary.”

A statement in support of their eviction was taken from one of the neighbors, Katharine O’Brien, 25, then the girlfriend of indie movie producer Brad Schlei (*Swingers*, *Dogtown*). Earlier in the year, Schlei, a collector of Blake’s work, had hired him to direct an adaptation of the George Pelecanos novel *Nick’s Trip*.

“On the evening of May 9, 2006,” said O’Brien’s statement, “Theresa approached my bungalow and rapped on the window. Upon opening the door I was immediately greeted with the following questions>... Theresa said to me, ‘Jeremy and I have started a club where we’ve found a bunch of old men and we’re letting them fuck us in the ass, and we wanted to

know if you wanted to be a part of it.’ I asked Theresa if she was joking. She said ‘no’ and repeated herself. I asked if she was trying to imply something about the age difference between my boyfriend and me.” (Schlei is 41.) “She said ‘no,’ smiled, and walked away.

“That night”—a night Blake seemed to be away, uncharacteristically leaving Duncan alone—“Theresa ... returned to my bungalow five or six times,” the statement continued. “Out of the blue, she asked if I was a Scientologist.... For the record, I have no connection whatsoever with Scientology, and have never been a Scientologist.”

In the months prior to this encounter, the two couples—Duncan and Blake and O’Brien and Schlei—had become friendly with each other. Schlei had even signed the “loyalty oath” Blake and Duncan had taken to asking of some friends. “I just want to get this film made,” Schlei told someone.

“Theresa was acting very strangely,” O’Brien’s statement said. “She was displaying jerking body movements; her face and hands were twitching. She continued to accuse me of being a Scientologist and part of a Scientology conspiracy to defame her.... At times I would hear her cackling and hooting from the alley.

“The next day, May 11, [Blake] withdrew from the business relationship he had with my boyfriend, claiming that I was a Scientologist and that my masters in Santa Barbara (my parents’ home) were instructing me to defame Theresa.”

Schlei says that Blake later told him he could provide him with “proof” that O’Brien was a Scientologist, but he never did. In July, when O’Brien came home and picked up her mail, she wrote, Duncan “shrieked ‘cult whore’ and ‘cult hooker’ repeatedly. She was very frightening.”

A Life in Turnaround

Lovely Theresa Duncan liked to go for drives along the Pacific Coast Highway in her butter-colored Alfa Romeo Spider, listening to Steely Dan. She liked the band for the stories they told about hard-luck characters. Some of their lyrics were read at her funeral, on July 21, in Lapeer, Michigan, her hometown.

In 2002, the year she and Jeremy Blake moved to Los Angeles (they had been living in New York since 1995), Duncan was riding the crest of a seven-year wave of success. Stories about “Silicon Alley’s dream girl” had appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*,

People, along with dozens of photographs of her looking glamorous. She had been to “new media” what Jane Pratt was to magazines or Tabitha Soren to MTV—the pretty girl, the chosen one. Her CD-ROMs, *Chop Suey*, *Smarty*, and *Zero Zero*, had been hailed as breakthrough games for girls. *Chop Suey* was named *Entertainment Weekly*’s “CD-ROM of the Year” in 1995.

When she moved to Los Angeles, Duncan had a two-picture deal with Fox Searchlight and had written and directed a pilot for Oxygen Media. She had “my boyfriend Jeremy Blake”—she was always bringing him up—literally the poster boy of the 2001 “BitStreams” exhibition of digital art at the Whitney Museum. That same year, Blake had been tapped by director Paul Thomas Anderson to create a hallucinogenic dream sequence for *Punch Drunk Love*, and singer-songwriter Beck had asked him to do a series of covers and a video for his album *Sea Change* (both released in 2002).

And then, something began to go very wrong.

“Yes, it looks like New York is a good idea for a few,” Blake wrote breezily in an e-mail to a friend on December 22, 2006, announcing that he and Duncan were moving back. They had evacuated their Venice bungalow two weeks after receiving their landlord’s August letter, cramming themselves into the small office space near the beach Blake had been using as a studio. They were low on funds.

Blake wrote of how he and Duncan had been “harassed here to the point of absurdity” by people who were so “paranoid” that it made him “laugh.” He said that they had been “defamed by crazy Scientologists,” threatened and followed by “their thugs.” (The Church of Scientology has denied any knowledge of the couple.) He wrote of how New York was starting to seem like the place for them to be, a place where they could speak “freely” to “exceptional people” and get their projects started.

Meanwhile, Hollywood, Blake said, was “under a pathetic right-wing invasion” by the Bush administration and “extremist religious groups.” He mentioned a couple of media companies with obvious Republican leanings. And then he said, “They are even running ads on the Cartoon Network recruiting people to be in the CIA!”

He spoke of how he was beginning to realize that his work had the “power to influence” a global audience without the need for “corporate backing.” “I am starting to see this as a very

powerful thing,” he said. “Almost miraculous. Best, J.B.”

Love Story

Jeremy Blake and Theresa Duncan first met in 1994. They were both part of the activist, “positive force” punk-rock scene in Washington (think Fugazi, Bikini Kill). He hung around with the band Nation of Ulysses, believed in punk as a philosophy. It was a macho, hipster scene. The women tended to stay in the background, dressed frumpy. Theresa called them “the hausfraus 2000.” She went to parties wearing sequined hot pants. Her boyfriend was Mitch Parker, former bassist of Government Issue. They had a song called “Asshole.” Sometimes she would take out her compact and apply lipstick when someone was boring her.

She had moved to Washington in 1989 to take a job at a family friend’s antiques store. It was a way to get out of Detroit, where she’d been working mostly dead-end jobs after high school. (She never finished college.) She was born in nearby Lapeer (population 9,330), which she described on her blog as “subject to incredible boredom punctured by baroque social intrigue.”

She was Mimi Smartypants, star of *Smarty*. “At the quarry in July,” she wrote, “my cousins told me the water was ‘bottomless,’ and so I hugged the shore and learned to swim in the Lapeer library instead, suspecting already exactly what the limitless meant.... Ever after I knew all the haunted shades of meaning that were captive in other people’s words. And for that they called me mad.”

Her conversations were always racing with ruminations about “film, philology, Vietnam War memorabilia, rare and discontinued perfume”—listed on her blog as “Interests”—and facts about such obscure historical personages as “the owner of Napoleon’s penis” (a true story) and the “tiny Spanish bullfighter Manolete, who died so tragically in the ring in the 1940s.”

The house she grew up in was on a dirt road. When she was little, her mother, Mary, stocked shelves in a grocery store; her father, Donnie, was a factory worker. A friend said that “some really bad things happened to her” with men; she thought “every man was out to get her.” But she never let it show. People said she was the most confident person in the world. She wanted to be famous. She wanted to be noticed.

Jeremy wanted to be a hero. “I liked reading about heroic behavior and the constant ethical

dilemmas of Marvel characters spoke to me directly,” he said in an interview. “They were a precursor to the punk records I have still not outgrown.” He told a friend that he “took his personality cues from Chevy Chase in *Caddyshack* and Han Solo in *Star Wars*.” Some people thought he was a snob, drinking his Manhattans and smoking his Nat Sherman cigarettes, until they realized he was just an artist, and funny and shy.

He made her laugh.

They moved to New York separately in 1995 and ran into each other backstage at a concert at the Knitting Factory that year. She was “a blonde to make a bishop kick a hole in a stained glass window,” Jeremy told someone, quoting Raymond Chandler. She was just this girl in Washington and now she was famous—everybody was talking about her. How’d she do that? (Nerve. She was a receptionist at a Washington CD-ROM company, Magnet Interactive, when she walked into the boss’s office with a pitch dreamed up by a co-worker, whom she made her partner.)

He was 23, she 28. They started talking and they never stopped. He thought she was lovely.

She was a little bit wild (not sexually, God no—she was rather demure there—*intellectually*) and Jeremy loved wildness in people. “By wildness I’m not referring to some corny idea of rock ’n’ roll excess,” he said. “I’m talking about an internal turbulence and inventiveness that keeps the person and everyone around him or her on their toes.”

She could be combative. She let people know there was a line they couldn’t cross with her.

He was working as a photo retoucher when they got together. He had just graduated from Cal Arts, didn’t really know what he wanted to “do” except that he wanted to make art. He wasn’t interested in fame; he wanted to change the world, to tell stories through art that exposed racism, class inequality, violence. Did that make sense? It did to her.

She hired him as her illustrator and art director at Nicholson New York, a new-media company with offices in the Puck Building. They did *Smarty* in 1996. He loved making the pictures of the smart little blonde girl with big brown eyes. They did *Zero Zero* in 1997. “They were co-muses,” said a friend.

He loved the way they lived, starting with the style of their apartment on Broome Street—it was like a reflection of her intricate brain, stuffed with all her books and knickknacks. He

teased her, called her “Tucky,” for Tucky the Squirrel, some squirrel on a billboard for a storage-space company. She was a pack rat.

He loved that they knew interesting people, had them over all the time—artists, musicians, writers, producers—constantly drank, smoked, laughed, and never turned on the television.

She started promoting him. As with everything else she did, she was fervent about it, making friends with gallerists in the New York art world (Andrea Rosen, Bronwyn Keenan). Suddenly his work was showing everywhere. He was getting known himself.

Her confidence was contagious. It was “punk.” Inspired, he started making art on his computer—deeply hued, slow-moving films that were “difficult to categorize and that’s part of the fun,” he said. “I think I have invented a new, more poetic kind of pop art that blends elements of pop and noir.” His first solo shows, in New York and Los Angeles in 1999, blew everybody away.

She made him feel free, and that made him feel loyal. Jeremy had a thing about loyalty, said friends, maybe something to do with his father’s death. No one knew for sure; all anyone could say with certainty was that Jeremy and Theresa loved each other.

“Where do you want to be when the Big One hits?” a Los Angeles reporter once asked her. “Asleep in Jeremy Blake’s arms,” she said.

It’s All in Your Mind

It was *The History of Glamour*—the witty, 40-minute-long animated film Duncan made while at Nicholson—that got her noticed by Hollywood. The film, a semi-autobiographical satire about the rise of an indie-girl rocker, showed in the 2000 Whitney Biennial—another milestone in Duncan’s own ascendance. (*Glamour* was co-illustrated by Jeremy Blake.) It’s hard, watching it now, to understand how Duncan ever wound up a suicide. Her movie is full of wry humor and silliness, and is a cautionary tale about the emptiness of fame and the corrupting influence of ambition.

Ironically, the attention it received only made Duncan more ambitious. “I’ve been thinking of us in terms of something like the Warhol factory,” she crowed to *Salon*, when asked about her “creative team.”

But in Hollywood, no one gets to be Warhol, not even Warhol. “She seemed a bit naïve about

Hollywood,” said Sex Pistols impresario Malcolm McLaren (whom Blake had been working on a portrait of when he died). “She went in hoping people would listen to her, but in Hollywood you’re the one who has to listen.”

For two years, between 2002 and 2004, she struggled to get her script *Alice Underground* made, wondering why things weren’t happening as fast for her as they had in the gaming industry, where she was an instant star. *Alice Underground*—the story of a rock star who is kidnapped by two New York prep-school girls (with echoes of *The World of Henry Orient*)—was originally part of Duncan’s two-picture deal at Fox Searchlight. She wanted to make a more expensive and complicated film than the studio had envisioned, but she also had, she said, a real rock star attached. In early 2003, she began telling people that she had secured a promise from Beck to act in the vehicle.

“Beck and I met repeatedly to discuss the film,” she later e-mailed someone.

“We never met to discuss doing her film,” Beck e-mailed *Vanity Fair*. “I did read her script eventually.” But he said he never agreed to be in her movie.

The postmodern rocker described his relationship with Blake and Duncan as “a passing social acquaintance.” “I met Jeremy in summer 2002 when we worked on the *Sea Change* artwork,” he said. “After that, I saw him out a handful of times.... We exchanged occasional e-mails. The last time I heard from them was 2004.”

Meanwhile, Duncan was e-mailing people photographs of herself and Blake relaxing on a Malibu beach with Beck and his wife, Marissa Ribisi (twin sister of actor Giovanni Ribisi), who was pregnant at the time, dating the photograph to 2004. (Marissa gave birth to their first child, Cosimo, that year.)

Duncan told people that their friendship ended abruptly when Beck called her up out of the blue, she said, politely bowing out of her film without explanation.

“I did explain to her I wasn’t looking to act right then,” Beck said, “and with the album, tour schedule, and a baby on the way, it wouldn’t be feasible to do a film.”

Duncan seemed personally wounded—frustrated, too, at another setback in her efforts to get a movie made. She blamed the Church of Scientology.

Beck's involvement in Scientology was unconfirmed to the public until 2005, when he acknowledged his affiliation in an interview with *The New York Times*, lauding the sect for its work with illiterate kids and drug addicts. His father, musician David Campbell, who lives in Los Angeles, is also a Scientologist, as is his wife, Marissa.

According to Duncan, sometime in their two-year acquaintance, Beck expressed to her and Blake a desire to leave the church, and they had offered him encouragement and even assistance. "That's ridiculous. Totally false," Beck said. "Had we been closer and discussed anything as personal as religion, I would have only had positive things to say about Scientology."

Duncan e-mailed a friend in late 2006: "[Beck] really, really tried to get away ... using going to NY to be in *Alice Underground*.... He told me he wanted to leave the cult desperately, and this is what they do when someone knows that." She was referring here to her perception that the Church of Scientology had been harassing her and Blake. "Never heard of these people. This is completely untrue," Scientology spokeswoman Karin Pouw told the *Los Angeles Times*.

"They are furious because he valued our way of life far more than Celebrity Center sex trash," wrote Duncan.

While the missive may be tainted with Duncan's increasing paranoia, the Scientologists' "Celebrity Centre" is real. Housed, according to their Web site, in a "Hollywood chateau" in Los Angeles, it caters to the sect's celebrity members, which famously include actors Tom Cruise and John Travolta, both huge donors to the organization. (Scientology claims 10 million members worldwide.) A representative for Beck said he did not know whether Beck was a donor.

By "sex trash" Duncan may have been referring, crudely, to widely disseminated but unsubstantiated rumors that Scientology pressures its followers to remain in the church by threatening to make public their past indiscretions. What is true is that members submit to the questioning of "auditors" who draw out their fears, secrets, and guilty memories in an effort to "clear" them. The church has acknowledged in the past that auditors' records are kept in confidential files.

It is also true that Blake and Duncan, however unbalanced they became, were not the first to

claim they were being “harassed” by Scientologists. There’s an extensive body of journalism on the subject, notably including an award-winning 1991 *Time* article entitled “The Thriving Cult of Greed and Power,” by Richard Behar, who called the church “a hugely profitable global racket that survives by intimidating members and critics in a Mafia-like manner.”

Scientology sued Behar, *Time*, and Time Warner for libel in U.S. District Court in New York after the piece was published. Ten years later, in January of 2001, after a lengthy legal battle, the U.S. Court of Appeals in New York upheld an earlier ruling saying that the defendants had an absence of malice in publishing the article, because Behar had conducted a standard investigation before writing his article.

His report had also included an account of how “eleven top Scientologists, including [Scientology founder L. Ron] Hubbard’s wife, were sent to prison in the early 1980s for infiltrating, burglarizing and wiretapping more than 100 private and government agencies in attempts to block their investigations.”

In his *Manual of Justice*, from 1959, Hubbard wrote, “People attack Scientology, I never forget it, always even the score. People attack auditors, or staff, or organisations, or me. I never forget until the slate is clear.”

Obsession

None of what Blake and Duncan said can be proven, and perhaps none of it is true, but sometime in 2004 they began to believe they were being harassed. “I got the sense that they were genuinely afraid,” said one friend. “It wasn’t just weird party conversation. There was a real fear there.”

It started, they said, with repeated phone calls late at night. Sometimes the person on the other end of the line would just hang up, and sometimes he would say something to the effect of “Did you have a good meeting today?” Then there were men, Duncan said, who would show up outside their house in Venice Beach, sometimes standing watching them, sometimes sitting in a car. She began taking pictures of out-of-state license plates. It became an obsession. She took “hundreds of pictures.”

She said that one day a man came up to her while she was walking her Yorkshire terrier, Tuesday (after Weld), and said, “Hey, what a sweet dog. It would be too bad if something happened to it.”

They said they found a dead cat on their roof.

Duncan became terrified, and Blake wanted to protect her.

“I felt that, in the beginning, at least some of it was real,” said Raymond Doherty, a friend of the couple’s (and a former boyfriend of Theresa’s). “I believed her. I still believe her. She was never paranoid before this. But Jeremy was writing to me and saying, ‘She’s going to be fine, this stuff will die down.’ ”

It didn’t—at least not in Duncan’s mind. So convinced was she of what was going on that she e-mailed a *Los Angeles Times* reporter and tried to get her to write a story about it (she didn’t respond). It started to seem to her that no one could be trusted, that everyone was suspect. How did these people watching them know so much about them? She came to believe that someone was informing on them. Her behavior grew increasingly erratic, poisoning relationships with friends and business connections of both hers and Blake’s. He always defended her—when he wasn’t manifesting a paranoia of his own.

At a 2005 exhibition at the Sister art gallery in Los Angeles—which is owned by Katie Brennan, who had shown Blake’s work there in 2004—Blake accosted a filmmaker who had been considering working with him, screaming, “I want my fucking art back—I want my fucking art back!” (The filmmaker had a DVD of Blake’s work which he had forgotten to give back.)

Christine Nichols, the owner of another Los Angeles gallery, Works on Paper, Inc., had become close to both Blake and Duncan after showing Blake’s work there in a number of shows between 1998 and 2001. Then, in 2005, the couple accused her of being the person behind an inflammatory e-mail about them that had been sent around to people they knew. (Nichols denies being the sender.) At a Fourth of July party at Brad Schlei’s house, Duncan screamed at Nichols, grabbing her arm and bruising it badly. After this, whenever he saw her, Blake pretended he didn’t know her.

“Theresa and Jeremy fed off each other in every way,” said film composer Ed Shearmur (*Charlie’s Angels*, *Factory Girl*). Shearmur and his wife, Alli, a former co-president of production at Paramount Pictures, had been avid collectors of Blake’s work. “It had this dazzling, gorgeous visual quality,” he said. “I was mesmerized by it.” Alli Shearmur had also been an advocate of Duncan’s script *Alice Underground* at Paramount, after the film didn’t

get made at Fox Searchlight.

“Theresa took it very personally that the project didn’t go forward despite everything that Alli did to foster it,” Shearmur said. Then Duncan started sending e-mails which “became really nasty and Alli felt that they were threatening. We stopped communicating with them about a year or so ago.”

The friends that Blake and Duncan did keep were increasingly assaulted not only with e-mails but also with long, detailed harangues at their Venice bungalow about the Scientologists’ alleged harassment. Blake wrote a 27-page document encapsulating their claims, which he planned on using as the basis for a lawsuit against the Church of Scientology. (In it, Tom Cruise was blamed for undermining the project at Paramount, something Cruise has denied. Duncan’s agent, Renee Tab, said the movie was ultimately shelved due to budget considerations.)

Duncan wrote screeds on her blog (which she launched in 2005) about people she claimed were connected to C.I.A. plots and right-wing conspiracies: Blake’s former girlfriend Anna Gaskell (who once broke his heart), and Reza Aslan, an Islamic scholar they had been friends with. Gaskell and Aslan have both denied her allegations.

It’s telling that Blake’s most famous and most powerful work, the *Winchester* trilogy (2004), is a study of a woman’s madness, of her consuming, paranoiac obsession. Sarah Winchester (1839–1922), heiress to the Winchester rifle fortune, grief-stricken at the death of her husband and infant daughter, was told by a medium that she must move to California and never stop building on a giant house, to appease the ghosts of all those who had died by her family’s evil rifles. Which she did. The Winchester Mystery House, now a tourist attraction in San Jose, California, built over 38 years, has 160 rooms, 40 staircases, 950 doors, and 10,000 windows.

“My interest in the mansion,” Blake said in the catalogue for the 2004 *Winchester* show, “is rooted in an understanding that the site is more than just a monument to one person’s eccentric fears—it is the tangible outcome of a pileup of social and historical narratives.”

Sanctuary

The cosmic pileup was in overdrive when, in mid-January of 2007, Blake and Duncan moved into the St. Mark’s Church rectory and instantly befriended Father Frank Morales.

Morales, 58, is a longtime East Village activist, generally credited as being the leader of the New York squatter movement of the 80s and 90s. In the last 10 years, he has refashioned himself as a journalist, investigating what he refers to as “the domestic operations of the Pentagon” and the “militarization of the police.” He is the winner of two Project Censored awards (for “The News That Didn’t Make the News”) from Sonoma State University, most recently for his Internet-published piece “Bush Moves Toward Martial Law” (2006).

In short, he’s the radical left’s Fox Mulder, a man who makes mere “conspiracy theorists” look like Sunday drivers.

“My paranoia is rooted in reality,” he says, half joking.

When Blake and Duncan moved back to New York in early January of 2007, Duncan very much wanted to get the rectory apartment at St. Mark’s. It was both beautiful, overlooking the church’s garden, and bizarre, allegedly haunted by the ghosts of Edgar Allan Poe and Harry Houdini.

At an interview with the church’s vestry members in January, Duncan spoke animatedly of her and Blake’s many accomplishments; he didn’t say much. She never mentioned why they left their last residence, and the vestry apparently never checked up on their past.

There was just one problem: their funds didn’t seem to be in order, and the three-bedroom apartment was \$5,000 a month. (Blake and Duncan later borrowed money for their security deposit from family members.)

But Morales, who saw them as the sort of people who belonged at the church—long a hangout for artists, from Andy Warhol to Allen Ginsberg—walked out of the meeting with them and assured them he would put in a good word. “Jeremy kind of looked at me sideways and said, ‘You’re a priest?’ And I looked back at him and said, ‘You’re an artist?’ We immediately liked each other,” he said.

Blake installed himself in a consulting job at Rockstar Games, the outfit behind *Grand Theft Auto*, where he had worked nearly 10 years before. He was busy preparing for his upcoming show, scheduled to open at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, in Washington, in October. (“Wild Choir: Cinematic Portraits by Jeremy Blake” will be there through March.) But he and Duncan needed the money. “It can’t have felt like anything but a step backward to go back to Rockstar,” said Ed Shearmur. “It must have taken an awful lot of bravery on Jeremy’s part.

He had this show coming up and he had already missed one deadline.”

Duncan—in “Tucky” mode—set about decorating the new apartment. She became fixated on projects like dappling the kitchen walls with Italian tile. She bought things, a shiny, silver metal cuckoo clock. She seemed cheerful, always running home with flowers.

“She was like the happy homemaker,” said Morales.

Two Against the World

She was drinking more frequently, and so was Blake, taking his hip flask of Maker’s Mark whiskey with him sometimes to work. She drank champagne by the bottle—all there ever was in their refrigerator. It was starting to show in their faces; they were looking haggard.

She seemed frustrated by the lack of movement on *Alice Underground*, which she continued to discuss on the phone with contacts in Hollywood. Meanwhile, everybody they knew was talking about how Blake’s upcoming show was going to put him on another level as an artist. “She was fiercely proud of him,” said her friend Blake Robin. “She supported him totally. There was no rivalry.”

And yet, she seemed to fear that she was becoming unknown. One night, at a gathering of New York friends at the rectory apartment—she and Blake were once again throwing lively soirées—Duncan dragged out of a closet her old CD-roms and a copy of *The History of Glamour*. “Everybody kind of looked at each other like, Oh no, what is she doing?” said someone who was there.

Maybe it was Morales’s refreshing lack of knowledge of anything connected with Hollywood that made the couple gravitate so heavily now toward the hip pastor. Or maybe it was his knowledge of subjects which had come to interest them, which other friends of theirs considered a bit nutty. “The U.S. government invaded Iraq on the basis of lies and still some people want to deny the existence of conspiracies,” said Morales.

In May, Duncan published on her blog a long conversation with Morales on topics such as MK-Ultra and Operation Chaos—actual C.I.A. mind-control and surveillance programs between the 50s and the 70s. She announced on the blog (two days before she died) that she was writing a piece called “The Devil and Dick Cheney”—“a metaphysical investigation,” Morales explained, into whether the vice president “could actually be Satan.”

Typically they would ask him up for a drink at the beginning of an evening that would then take them on to modish spots like the downtown Bowery Hotel, the Beatrice Inn, and Bungalow 8 (Amy Sacco, the club's owner, was an old friend of the couple's).

Morales remembers how, one night at the Beatrice, Duncan, surrounded by fashionable friends, prodded him to tell everyone about Operation Garden Plot—a U.S. military plan to respond to what it calls “domestic civil disturbances”—which Morales sees as part of the military's “war on dissent.” “Civil disturbance” can also mean “protest.”

But in that setting, with the nightclub's music blaring, even he thought it was “a little odd.”

For his part, Morales said he liked the couple because they were “amazingly brilliant and funny. Jeremy would do impersonations that would crack you up. Once he quoted this long passage from *Macbeth* in the voice of Tony Soprano.” They exchanged albums and books. Duncan started reading the Bible. She and Blake started attending the Sunday-morning services at St. Mark's, although he had been raised Jewish, and she Catholic.

Morales said he knew they had had some trouble in Los Angeles, but he never knew the extent of it, only that they believed the Church of Scientology was harassing them and that they were afraid. “You're safe here,” he told them. “Theresa would sometimes express fears about being watched. She would say, ‘Look, those men in that car over there are watching us.’ I didn't have any way of knowing if there was a basis to this. My impulse with these things is always: Let's investigate.”

He offered to contact his friend Alex Jones about doing a Scientology show on his nationally syndicated radio program (*The Alex Jones Show*), which specializes in government secrets and conspiracies. Blake liked the idea. In January, he had sent someone an e-mail promoting Jones as a “colorful Texas populist who has hipster credibility.” It was through Jones's show that he had become familiar with the “9/11 truth movement” and its questioning of the U.S. government's so-called “official story.” He had e-mailed friends about this too. He now became a semi-regular attendee at the Sunday-night 9/11-truth meetings at St. Mark's Church, which Morales oversees. Morales said, “He was talking about doing art around 9/11 truth.”

“I'm not some kind of conspiracy nut,” said Chris Burke, a friend of the couple's, “but I can see the merit in some of these questions. But then I thought Jeremy would go beyond it into

another realm, where he wasn't being entirely rational."

Morales said he was taken aback when Blake told him he had bought a gun while he was out of town. "I didn't like having it around. Jeremy saw himself as a bit of a warrior, a cowboy. He was a great believer in the right to defend yourself."

The Tipping Point

It was sometime in the late spring that a psychiatrist friend told Blake that she believed he should get some help. She thought he was becoming delusional.

And yet, watching him in the footage from an interview with England's ITV done in the rectory in April—it was for a special on Malcolm McLaren—he seems stable and happy, quietly proud as he shows off images from the McLaren portrait he was working on, *Glitterbest*.

Duncan can be heard in the background, babbling to Morales in the kitchen. At one point the ITV crew asks Blake to shush her. "That means you," he says sweetly.

She seemed happier, too, and had been writing yet another version of *Alice Underground*. She was excitedly planning to co-write, with Blake, a new script for *Nick's Trip*, the George Pelecanos novel Blake had been originally hired by Brad Schlei to direct. Schlei's option had expired, and now Blake had been talking directly with Pelecanos about doing the film together; he would still direct.

She was also busy organizing a July 3 fund-raiser for St. Mark's Church. The event, to raise money for the church's crumbling façade, "was her idea totally, and she was tireless in making it happen," said Morales.

In the week prior to the event, however, Duncan had been acting strangely again, sending testy e-mails to a friend who had been helping her plan the party. She showed these e-mails to Morales. "It was just a silly dispute over how much to charge for beer," he said. "I tried to stay out of it."

He said he wondered later if his being noncommittal about this—not defending her, as it were—was why, for about a week prior to her death, Theresa and Jeremy seemed to be avoiding him. He would see her coming home and walking around the church instead of through the garden, as if to steer clear of him.

Oddly, Duncan and Blake also didn't come down from their apartment during the fund-raiser—a spirited, smashing success which raised \$12,000, enough to repair the church entrance. As hundreds of people reveled below them in the garden, they stayed up in the rectory, surrounded by a few friends. Morales was not invited.

He said he wondered too if Duncan's avoidance could have been due to a conversation they had had one night not long before this, when she "seemed to be feeling very vulnerable." It was one evening when Blake was still working at Rockstar, and Duncan was waiting for him to come home, as she had found herself doing more and more, according to friends.

She had bought Morales's nine-year-old son a book, *The Dangerous Book for Boys*, and he had gone up to thank her. (Morales said that Blake had expressed surprise when he heard about it. " 'She bought your son a book?' Jeremy said. 'Oh, that's good!' ")

"We got to talking about kids," Morales said, "and she seemed to go into this other place. She said, 'You know, sometimes I think about having a baby. Maybe I'll have a kid someday.' And I said something like 'Well, you'd be a great mother, you're young, you can still do it.' And she got tears in her eyes."

"She called me a few days before she died," said her friend Raymond Doherty. "She sounded very vulnerable and it left me concerned. There was something in her voice that made me wonder what was wrong."

First Love, Last Rites

The night before her suicide, July 9, Duncan, Blake, George Pelecanos, and producer Cary Woods had a meeting at a restaurant in Washington, near where Pelecanos lives. It was a good meeting, ending with the ol' Hollywood high fives. Pelecanos liked Blake and Duncan's ideas, and Woods was on board to produce *Nick's Trip* (although he hasn't had a big success in a few years, Woods was still a name in the independent-film world Blake and Duncan had confidence in).

Pelecanos, who had met the couple only once before, said, "You could tell they were really into each other, like when you first date a woman and you are in the phase where you can't get enough of each other. The last time I saw them, they were walking across the street holding hands."

The next afternoon, July 10, back in New York, Blake came home to have lunch with Duncan

at about three p.m., as he often did. But no one seems to know which restaurant they went to, or what happened there. What did they talk about? No one in 12 years had ever seen them have an argument. How did they say good-bye to each other?

Or were they just sitting, eating, chatting, giving no clues at all as to what was about to happen? Just a few days before, on July 5, Duncan had posted on her blog this quote from Franz Kafka: “When you stand in front of me and look at me, what do you know of the griefs that are in me and what do I know of yours?”

Around seven p.m., Blake came home from work. Walking through the church garden he saw Morales and invited him up. Morales said he would join them in a few minutes.

Then, about 10 minutes later, Morales said, he noticed there were a number of police cars outside the rectory entrance on East 11th Street. He hurried up to the apartment, where Blake was in the living room, “sobbing, pounding the walls with his fist, screaming, ‘Dammit, fuck, no, this can’t be happening.’ ”

The police were with Duncan’s body in the bedroom. Blake never went back inside. He had found her on the bed. Her face seemed almost smiling. Somehow, one of her hands had traveled up toward her cheek and was frozen there, as if she had just thought of something else she wanted to say.

Some detectives arrived and began questioning Blake in Duncan’s office. Was she depressed? Was she stressed out? they asked him. “No more than usual,” Blake said, shaking his head. Did you have an argument? “No.”

Morales asked to be let into the bedroom to perform last rites over Duncan’s body. She was now on the floor, where the E.M.S. workers had been examining her. He knelt down and spoke the prayers. “It didn’t seem possible,” he said. “It seemed so out of character.”

For several hours, Blake had to wait for the morgue workers to come and take away her body. He wouldn’t leave Duncan’s office or go near the bedroom, continuing to sit motionless, “looking very withdrawn.” One cop stayed, standing watch in front of the bedroom door.

Finally, around 11 p.m., the men from the morgue arrived. (The official cause of Duncan’s death was suicide by acute intoxication due to the combined effects of diphenhydramine

—which is present in Benadryl and Tylenol PM—and alcohol. The New York City medical examiner’s office would not comment on whether there were other drugs found in her system.)

Morales followed the men carrying Duncan’s body in a black bag out to their truck. Blake would not, maybe could not, go with them.

When Morales came back to the apartment, he said, Blake had moved to the living room. “Please don’t leave me,” he said. He and Morales sat in the dark, drinking whiskey, saying nothing for about an hour.

Blake just held his head in his hands, looking at the floor.

And then the silver cuckoo clock Duncan had bought when they moved into the apartment started chiming. “Cuckoo, cuckoo,” 12 times.

“Well, that about sums it up,” Morales said in the quiet, meaning that it was all so unbelievable.

Blake looked up suddenly. “You got that right, man,” he said.

Other friends came soon after and put Blake to bed. He refused to change the sheets. In the middle of the night, “his mother called, and he wouldn’t wake up,” said Morales. “I tried shaking him. But it was like he couldn’t deal with it anymore.”

In Memoriam

‘Dear All,’ read the e-mail Blake sent to a few people, including his gallerist and curator, on the morning of July 12. He apologized for having to relay the news that he had “suffered a terrible and unexpected personal tragedy this week.” He then told everyone that Theresa had “passed away.”

Blake said that Theresa was “never a person to compromise,” and that he had a “clear understanding” that she had made the decision to end her life. He said that in doing so she had exhibited the same “strength” that she had shown when she was alive.

He asked his friends that they mention to everyone they spoke to of her death that she was “beautiful, generous, and lived by a code all her own,” that they not “spread more sadness in the world,” but “show respect” for someone who had loved them all.

He then expressed his desire to continue his work on his upcoming show “when I recover from this.”

The Long Good-Bye

But he didn’t recover.

For a week he wandered around in a detached, numb state, seemingly going through the motions. He had dinner with his and Duncan’s families, who came to New York. He didn’t argue when Mary Duncan wanted to take her daughter’s body back to Lapeer. Theresa had once expressed a desire to be buried there, next to her grandmother.

He received consoling friends in the church garden, where he would sit for hours with the dog, Tuesday. “He talked about [Theresa’s] inability to compromise,” said creative director Richard Pandiscio. “He talked about how it was inevitable that his work for the rest of his life would be about Theresa. He gave me a picture of her. He slipped it into my pocket and he said, ‘Hold on to this for me.’ ”

His psychiatrist friend felt that Blake was at great risk for suicide. A group was instantly organized to keep watch over him round the clock: Mike Fellows, Ian Svenonius, Guy Picciotto—all old buddies from the punk scene in Washington—Morales, and a few others.

One night some of them were in the rectory, keeping Blake company, and somebody asked Morales about 9/11 conspiracies. Blake looked up from a morose reverie and said, pointing a finger, “I don’t want to hear about that! I’m not going down that way!” “That’s right,” Morales told him. “We’re not going to talk about that right now.”

Blake seemed to be trying to make amends with certain people for whatever mistakes he felt he had made. “I guess we could have done some things differently,” he told someone.

Ed Shearmur said that when he called to offer his sympathy, two days after Duncan killed herself, Blake “was contrite about the fact that our relationship had fallen apart. ‘All that nonsense,’ he said, ‘I just want to put it behind me.’ I said, ‘Jeremy, we love you.’ ”

And he seemed to be trying to figure out just why she had done it. It seemed to have taken him completely aback.

“I get it,” he suddenly said one evening, looking up from his chair. “She won.”

— JEFF GORDON

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Video: The History of Glamour, Theresa Duncan's 1999 animated film.

A short while later, he told someone, “I need to make a decision.” A decision about what, he didn’t say.

On July 17, the day before he was set to drive to Detroit with three friends—Fellows, Doherty, and Morales—for her funeral, Blake went to work, insisting he felt O.K.

He never came home. He had talked about going out to visit his friend Chris Burke, a sound designer who lives in Park Slope, Brooklyn, with whom he had been working on the voice-over for *Glitterbest* (“a mad stream of consciousness,” as Malcolm McLaren put it, that Duncan had written).

“I’m coming to Brooklyn anyway,” Blake told him. But he never showed up.

After leaving the Rockstar offices, on lower Broadway, he took the A train all the way out to Rockaway Beach. Coincidentally, it was the birthplace of his mother.

Around eight p.m., an unidentified woman called 911 saying she had seen a man of Blake’s description walking naked into the water. It was the last in a series of heroic gestures he made for the lovely Theresa.

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Keywords
THERESA DUNCAN, JEREMY BLAKE, SUICIDE