

PROLOGUE

I'm sitting beside the pool at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel. And I'm waiting. Waiting - like I always did - in Hollywood. Los Angeles overhead is its usual flawless blue, as if some cosmetic sky surgeon has removed all clouds and creases of grey. Palm trees stretch upward, desperate for rain. But no rain will come. We will all remain dry here, I know that now. Star after star after star will stay pink and dry on The Boulevard.

That's Hollywood Boulevard, to those of you who have not lived through it. We - the survivors - haughtily refer to her as 'The Boulevard' as if there were no other street in the world.

Where is he? I know he's here somewhere. Look at this crowd. I know what he'd say about them.

He'd say, "how can there be so many goddamn beautiful women in diss town? Don't they realize how long they're gonna last in Hollywood? They'll last until eleven o'clock in the morning

because there is another bus arriving full of beautiful women to replace them. Goddamm primadonnas. They don't know how to play da game."

That's him speaking back in 1995, during the filming of *The Hollywood Bus Stop*. No one has ever seen it - and I've got the footage.

At the table next to me sits a peroxide blonde in less than a bikini. She is starvation thin save for her huge, unmoving breasts. On her lap sits a tiny pink poodle. In her mind... *She's Jayne Mansfield*. Though Jayne is long-gone, I have not forgotten. For Marilyn, for Jayne, for Jean, for Greta and every other blonde who dared to weather the tempest of Hollywood's mercurial waves, for those I suppose, and for other reasons too, I am now writing this for you...

Fifteen years have passed by for me, now where the fuck is he? I read somewhere that leaving Los Angeles is like giving up heroin. And as I sit here - trying not to stare too hard at Jayne - I can feel the junk slowly creeping back into my veins. *Oh please, please God of Lost Angels - please don't let it get me again.*

His name was Gilson Simoes. Everyone called him Gil. And in a town oft nick-named 'Holy-Weird' Gil was the weirdest of them all.

I got to Hollywood on June 1st, 1994. Marilyn Monroe would have been sixty eight - had she made it - on that day. Her star is outside McDonald's. Gil walked over Marilyn every day for twenty years, on his way to get a cheeseburger, the only food he could chew.

Gilson Simoes, Gilson, Gil... come back to The Boulevard, you mad lizard in the stars, come back Gil... I am a woman now, intelligent behind my furrowed brow and I can write books... this story is yours, you goddamm primadonna... I've travelled five thousand miles to write this out... I know you're here somewhere

Gil, now talk to me!

The DJ beside the Roosevelt pool is high on some new Hollywood drug and has turned up his volume even higher so that we can all hear, loud and clear, Peaches singing her masterpiece, "Fuck The Pain Away." I have never heard the song before, but it fits the scene perfectly. An insignificant afternoon in March of 2009, except that here in Hollywood every moment is significant and surreal. Every Hollywood hour always was stupefying, as I recall and now the beautiful people begin undressing to the Teaches of Peaches and I find myself hiding behind John Fante's *Ask The Dust*.

What a writer! What a book! How I wanted to cry out when Arturo Bandini shouted

"Los Angeles, Give Me Some of You!"

I wonder if any of these hideously handsome Hollywood types have read *Ask The Dust*... How can one read in this chaos, with Peaches shouting "fuck the pain away?" Why am I even trying to read? What am I doing here?

I thought Hollywood had reached its nadir fifteen years ago but this... The backside of The Boulevard has plummeted to new depths in my absence. It's no use reading books. John Fante's Los Angeles is not - nor ever was - my Los Angeles. What I see before me is more Dante than Fante.

Jayne Mansfield is struggling to articulate above the racket... the flawless waiter stands by, his waistcoat buttons polished, shimmering... she wants a strawberry daiquiri for herself and a saucer of Evian water for the poodle. Her voice is strictly silent movie, one of those actresses who didn't survive the jump into talkies. And all of a sudden comes an uprising of tears, a secret testimony to an overwhelming desire to take Jayne Mansfield in my arms, hold her softer than she has ever been held before and to drown out Peaches by saying something soft like...

"It's okay, Jayne - whatever your real name - you can be your

self now... It's all over, Jayne. The Hollywood nightmare is done and I promise you, dear, sweet, innocent Jayne, no one will ever try to steal your soul or hurt you again."

And Peaches keeps on "sucking on my titties like you wanted me, calling me..." and the beat is contagious and if I had half a soul or the newest Hollywood drug then I too would strip and jump into the pool. But here, in Hollywood, I learned early on, I learned it was better to keep my clothes on.

They were all fucking the pain away, those gorgeous bodies just fucking the fucking pain away at two in the afternoon and here I was, waiting for Gilson Simoes, dying for the past while compelled by the now, transfixed at the sight of just how low it is possible, in Hollywood, to go...

I got to Hollywood on a one-way plane ticket paid for with stolen money. I had three hundred American dollars in cash and no other money in the world. In a small bag I brought with me one blue silk dress and a portfolio of photographs taken while I had struggled to become some sort of model while I had struggled to study French and Italian then struggled to transfer to King's College for literature because of what James Joyce and Marion Tweedy, otherwise known as Molly Bloom, had done to my developing brain but even though it was agreed that I knew *Ulysses* I struggled to get out of bed for lectures because I was struggling with what L.A. eventually taught me was called Alcoholism. The modelling I did was usually naked but rarely paid. These and other impecunious pursuits kept me in Vodka until I finally jumped overboard to the La La Land of Dreams.

To Hollywood I also brought a demo tape of two songs I had recorded in London; songs which had not quite earned the record deal to which I felt entitled, even though I could not sing and had been coaxed into a band only because the musicians felt that blonde hair and a big mouth - and even bigger nipples - would attract the attention needed for fame for fame's sake.

Most importantly - in that little bag - I carried a surfeit of childhood dreams, dreams borne from the motion pictures that brought me through a childhood I can only conclude was irreconcilable. By the age of ten I was certain that Hollywood was my true home and that, even though I had never been there, Hollywood was incomplete without me.

I tore out a page from my school book and on the paper I wrote

"Please give me a one-way ticket to Hollywood please."

I hid the note in a special place for wishes which only little girls know about. Because even though Dorothy said there was no place like home, and even though Miss Scarlett wanted to go back to Tara, I knew that my home was Hollywood. One day mother found my secret note and she laughed at me. I took the note to a better hiding place and I said in a whisper

"I will get to Hollywood.

One day I will get to Hollywood.

And when I get to Hollywood I will be famous.

And then when I am famous I will feel okay."

I wanted to be just like Marilyn Monroe. On the back of a book about her I saw an address:

Roger Richman Agency
Los Angeles, California.

I went in secret to the post office. My letter said something like

Dear Roger Richman

This is a very urgent letter. I need to be famous or I will die. I need to be as famous as Marilyn Monroe. I am eleven years old and I am very unhappy because I am stranded in England but I

am supposed to be in Hollywood. I do not have time to slowly climb the ladder to success. I need to be rocketed into the fame dimension now. Please can you bring me to Hollywood as soon as possible?

I know I am meant to be there, with you. Please, please write back to me very soon, here is my address.

Yours Sincerely

Tracy Williams

When the letter came back with a sticker on it saying "RETURN TO SENDER, NOT KNOWN AT THIS ADDRESS" I took to my bed for weeks, watching *Valley of the Dolls* on a little black and white portable television. I knew that the pills those beautiful American women were taking would help me feel okay but mother told me to snap out of it because "depressed" was too big a word for such a crot of a kid.

With our very first video recorder I would rewind one scene from a documentary about Marilyn, in a film called *Bus Stop...* I watched that scene over and over and over again. She was sitting in a window frame in her fishnets and stiletto heels. Her blonde head was downcast and her face was fragile perfection. Her delicate hand had dropped in exhaustion to her side. She was as lost as a broken flower and I knew her despair. I was a lot younger than her but I already knew her sadness because it was always in my heart too... In the film her name was Cherie, which means "dear one..." Cherie had a map and on that map was Cherie's "direction." And a few minutes later in that same scene, Cherie showed her map to her friend and said, "Look where I'm going... HOLLYWOOD AND VINE!"

And I rewound the scene again. And I watched Marilyn Monroe's beauty ignite as she said "Hollywood and Vine." And when she said "Hollywood and Vine" I knew that I too could feel that same joy if I could also go to Hollywood and Vine. She had changed her name from Norma Jean to Marilyn Monroe and so I would change my name too. At first I decided to call myself Roxanne. I later changed my

name to Cherry, and even later to Sacha. But by the time I finally arrived in Hollywood I was just plain Tracy again.

It was not until 1999, at the Egyptian Theatre on Hollywood Boulevard that I saw Josh Logan's movie, *Bus Stop*. I watched, incredulous, as Cherie, my childhood idol, abandoned her Hollywood dream for a cowboy and a farm. Patronizing propaganda, I was furious with that shattered illusion. But that was 1999 and Marilyn's *Bus Stop* was released the day before her birthday back in 1956 and now, it's 2009 and women don't throw anything away for any man any more. I am no longer sure if this can be called 'progress.'

In *The Hollywood Bus Stop* of 1995, Gilson asserts that, "a war zone is safer than Hollywood for a girl."

"In a war zone," he says, "you get an army on your side, you get a gun, you get a bullet proof vest and all the other garbage. In Hollywood you got no protection. Young girls come here cos they wanna get famous, I dunno for what reason. They think because they got a good pair of legs and a beautiful ass, they're gonna get famous and they spend their last dollar... But they don't know how to play da game."

Kids came to Gilson's Casting from all over the world. Fragmented, lost kids with heart-aching dreams. A never-ending procession of cavalier innocence. I too was a lost kid when I arrived, but in my mind I was a woman who, like Marilyn, just wanted to be wonderful.

"They have no compassion!" Gilson would yell as he held up a newspaper clipping concerning the most recent suicide of another Hollywood starlet.

While some jumped from the Hollywood sign, others copulated under it. We fucked standing up, hanging onto the fence, faking orgasms for an imagined audience before we plunged to a self-inflicted or petit death, as unwilling to yield to reality as Macbeth.

Maybe my ego was too big to be accommodated by a culture so subsumed in pessimism; those sibilant four syllables encapsulating the message we British bequeath to our babies: "it can't be done."

No one was ever going to take me to Hollywood, I knew that. No one was going to send me to drama school and no one was going to arrange singing lessons for me. The best I could hope for was a painless transition from school to a factory to marriage to motherhood then death. A life in Blackout, at best.

I was eleven years old when I made my vow to get to Hollywood. I was twenty two when I arrived. No one would ever understand why I had to go and so I did not tell anyone except for this Dutch boy with whom I was apparently living. He said he loved me and I said I loved him but nothing hurt more than love and I was not fit for human consumption.

I had been crying and drinking and dying non-stop for about a month when he took me on his knee and said, "where's the Tracy I fell in love with?"

I hid my face in his neck and cried and cried.

He said, "what are you most of afraid of doing but would really like to do?"

He had read a lot of Herman Hesse and Friedrich Nietzsche too.

I was choking on my tears but I was able to say, "I want to go to Hollywood."

It was April - the cruellest month - 1994. Reading T.S Eliot night after day was not helping to heal the Wasteland inside and out.

About six weeks later that Dutch boy drove me all the way to Heathrow airport with tears in his eyes. I often console myself with the notion that I can't be all that bad to have attracted minds like his.

And thus is this Prologue almost said and done. There is only one more crucial point to make absolutely clear:

This story is not about me.

Hollywood Bus Stop

The Dark Side of Tinsel Town

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