

## Chapter 6

Standing Sentinel at the gateway to Hollywood Boulevard is a thirty foot tall gazebo held aloft by four Silver Sirens. In reality it's made of stainless steel but to me those Sirens were always solid silver... Look up and you will see in the finial Marilyn Monroe in her billowing skirt, the anonymous blonde from the Seven Year Itch. I walked that curve every night and every day for six years. My first time traversing Hollywood's Acropolis I had a chaperone... Once the sirens let you through you - mere mortal - will be walking on the stars.

My guide that night was a chain smoking, drunken madman dressed in a general's jacket. We began bickering from the very first star because Gilson Simoes wanted me to wear his jacket - complete with military decoration - on the grounds that it would make me look, as he put it, "more Hollywood."

"There is no way I am wearing that!" I said.

"Just try it on, hun, it will look great on you," said Gil.

I put it on then took it off and threw it back at him.

"What the fuck, hun, why not?" he said.

I looked down and yelled, "Gil! You're standing on Sophia Loren!"

He quickened his pace to catch me up.

"Honey, it makes you more Hollywood style!" he was shouting.

I said, "I don't know what version of Hollywood you are thinking of Gil, but it's not the Hollywood I know."

"Honey, just wear the jacket," he kept on, "I am your manager now... I been in dis town forever, Hun. I know what I'm talking about..."

I refused outright to acquiesce to such sartorial savagery. That jacket was too heavy with the perfume of a forty year addiction to nicotine and the stench of a hundred years of decaying dreams.

When we got to Louis Armstrong Gilson took off his waistcoat.

"No way!" I was shouting.

"Hun, you look great, I'm not saying you don't look beautiful," he went on, "but you're dressed for the normal world..."

"There is no fucking way I am going to dress up like a reject from an Adam and the Ants video," I said.

Gilson spread his arms open wide and shouted, "my arrogant English queen! You are such a bitch, you are gonna be a big star!"

He foisted the waistcoat upon me. A cluster of tourists congregating outside Ripley's were observing and smirking at this farce and - Believe It Or Not - I yielded just to shut him up. The waistcoat was plain black and fitted me perfectly. Gilson began bobbing up and down, delighted to see me in his costume. It was like walking through Old Hollywood with a munchkin from The Wizard of Oz.

He took my arm, I shrugged him off and at John Barrymore we crossed over.

"Dat was an actor," Gilson declared, "he was owd Hollywood, he had class! Better than all dis new Hollywood trash!"

I tried really hard to stay sweet, especially with all these stars under my feet but by the time we got to the shoe shine seats I wanted to muzzle or shoot my chaperone.

At the gates I halted without warning. Gilson noticed about four stars ahead and came back to where I was standing, transfixed, gazing into the black chasm where I could just about make out those high, mounted chairs, red velvet upholstery covered in dust and dirt, a stray box of black boot polish abandoned on the ground... once upon a time every Hollywood mogul and movie star had come here to have their shoes shined in a time when all shoes were shiny. The huge iron gates were padlocked on the inside.

"Such a shame it's all locked up," said I.

"No one gets their shoes shined in Hollywood any more, Hun. Cos no one in Hollywood got any class any more," said Gil.

He was actually quiet then, for a short while. Perhaps he understood what I was doing... I was going back in my mind... way

back to Old Hollywood and I gazed and breathed into the darkness until, gradually, the memories and images came... here comes Joe Gillis, circa 1949... lighting a cigarette, resting his shoes on the step as a faceless boy in dark blue overalls and flat cap kneels before him... Joe is worried about money, as all we writers always are... he had walked down The Boulevard from his apartment on Ivar... one day in the future I too will live up there, right next door to the Alto Nido Apartments and I, like Joe, will write up there... and who should next come walking by but the very man himself: Billy Wilder. And Billy Wilder is sitting down now, right alongside Joe Gillis and Billy Wilder is asking if Joe is ready for tomorrow?

Because tomorrow is the first early shoot for *Sunset Boulevard*, down on Melrose at Paramount Studios where Norma Desmond is waiting... And then here comes Jimmy Stewart donning a fedora, making everyone smile, reminding us all *It's A Wonderful Life*... and an anonymous boy begins polishing Jimmy's brogues, some anonymous, ambitious boy with a bowed head, trying to pluck up courage to say something impressive to Mr Wilder because this anonymous boy wants to take a shot at Hollywood, wants to move up from shining shoes... anything but stay stuck shining shoes and now who do I see, and my heart skips a beat because Humphrey Bogart has just stopped by, in a pinstripe suit and my romantic heart is aching for him to turn to me and say, "of all the shoe shine bars, Tracy..." but Bogey cannot see me, only I can see them and now they are all talking about the Golden Era as if it never ended and when Joe Gillis stands up and bids them au revoir I swallow my tears and hear myself say, "such a shame it's all shut down. Such a wonderful era, so long gone."

I glanced down at my cheap espadrilles and Gilson Simoes' feet. The Americans call them 'sneakers.'

"Hollywood has lost its land," I said.

Gilson said, "duh what?"

"Hollywoodland," I said, "that's what it used to be called, in 1923. The sign - up there - you know, the Hollywood sign... used to say Hollywoodland."

I was pointing to the sky, because we could not see the Hollywood sign. It was always up there, watching over us like an ominous demagogue, so that we never forgot where we were and what we were doing here. That sign watched over me every day for six years and every day of those six years I looked up at that sign, suppressing things in my heart and gut that I was not willing to admit, not yet. But this story is not about me.

I said, "when the Hollywoodland sign was put up it was to advertise new housing, it had nothing to do with The Industry."

"Yeah I knew dat," said Gil.

But I could tell that he did not know "dat" and I felt that he - of all people - ought to know "dat" and so I went on.

"Think about this," I said, "Harvey Wilcox is the man who created Hollywood. He wanted to build a sober community based on his religious beliefs. That is the origin of Hollywood! I think it was 1887... never forget, our Beloved Hollywood was created by a puritan with religious intent."

"Dat makes a lotta sense, goddammit," he said, "dat's why dis town is full of snakes."

I added, "vipers, rats, cheats and liars!"

And Gilson Simoes then applauded me and just to teach him who was boss I swiftly took his waistcoat off.

\*\*\*

In The Hollywood Bus Stop of 1995 Gilson asserts, "if you think you can buy Hollywood with sex it is not gonna happen... you know why? Cos there is another bus arriving at eleven o'clock in the morning, another bus full of beautiful girls with beautiful tits and beautiful pussy."

The casting couch era was purportedly dead by the time I got to Hollywood. All that remained of those infamous days were the sad spirits of too many lovely girls who had given everything in return for applause.

We were now standing over Tony Curtis.

"Hun, keep the goddamn waistcoat on!" said Gil, but I refused.

It occurred to me that this strange creature with his accent of flotsam and jetsam from all across the globe and me in my normal world attire, we two were not walking through reality, we were acting out a scene in some atrophied adaptation of Billy Wilder's *Some Like It Hot* in which Jack Lemmon was being played by Gilson Simoes while Sugar Cane was - of course - being played by me. Try as I might to be as sweet as her I could not quite get into character because his attempts to make me dress up like a general made me want to scream, "I'm a girl, you lunatic! I'm a goddamn fucking female!"

Our walk was all but done... and a door was slowly opened by a handsome doorman in a blood red waistcoat. Gilson said to him, "say hello to my new star, man."

The doorman shook my hand, then he let us in.

\*\*\*

It was like walking through a portal to the glorious past from whence my soul had come... everything from that moment on took place in cinematic slow motion... I had walked right into Old Hollywood, a past in which I had so long longed to belong... an era of high class poise... the bar was all mirror, a mirror all across the wall as high and long as the room itself... on tall, red PVC stools sat smoking drinkers, drinking smokers... lined up with shot glasses, their glazed eyes reflecting the pristine bottles all along the top shelf and on the far corner of the bar I saw an old cash register still in use... The bartenders also wore dark red waistcoats and stood lined up as neat as soldiers, except that every face bore a bright Hollywood smile.

*Elegant* was the first word that came into my mind but the ambience chilled me to the bone... I could have been an extra in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*... we were all trapped in Tinsel Town for eternity...

Every bartender knew Gilson Simoes well, this I could tell by the way they smiled at him. I quickly ordered an orange juice and

offered Gilson a beer... I was secretly terrified when it became clear that our bartender had just opened a tab and then I realized that in America barmen also expect a tip... I wished I could turn my insolvency off... I turned away... and that was the moment when I truly saw the scene...

The restaurant itself from my high angle... I saw it all in long-shot and there they all were and I thought *there they all are...* Musso & Frank's was replete with the most glamorous, sumptuous octogenarian diners I have ever seen... a soft jazz underscored what seemed to me their absolute silence, it was a silent movie set or so it looked to me... every round white linen table cloth perfectly laid... sparkling glasses, silver ice buckets, a waiter popped a champagne cork but no popping sound was heard... some were smiling, some were not and though their mouths were moving, no words emerged... the director had given strict instructions that there must be no sound on set on this special night... we must only give an impression of life, translucent life, Hollywood life...

They were connoisseurs of the cinema and they only communed with other connoisseurs of that same cinema... sipping their aperitifs, cutting through rare steaks, every woman drenched in Tiffany diamonds, engagement rings the size of grapes... I thought I saw Harry Winston sitting at table one and way in the corner was George Cukor, all alone... there's D.W. Griffith drinking red wine at the table alongside Max Von Mayerling and F.W. Murnau... the women are wearing Billy Travilla... their faces are painted by Whitey Snyder... every male wrist had a Cartier watch with which to tell the time, every man is dressed in sartorial elegance of the finest cloth... If my eyes did not deceive me - and even though this was California in June - I could have sworn an oath that I see a vicuña coat hanging near the restrooms... There they all were... an epic silent movie myth... dining together to maintain the myth... Dining together to ward off death... they seem to be preserved in a celluloid-formaldehyde not available for normal people, a rare Hollywood preservative which casts a surreal

filter over every natural flaw... and while they were indeed far more handsome than those of their age in the rest of the world it was all - somehow - desparate, grotesque...

They were movie moguls, tough producers, accomplished screenwriters, award winning directors. They were Old Hollywood Industry and here they all were... dining together to maintain that myth. As if dining together could ward off death.

I turned back to my own reflection in that momentous landscape of mirror... I could feel an awful, creeping suspicion that it had all been nothing more than fakery, fabulous fakery on an historic, epic scale... a beguilement more insidious than the general American Dream... a fakery designed to keep us all in thrall and now that we - the viewers - were awakening to Hollywood's detrimental lies, our backlash, our reaction to that wicked, wicked game, was to dress down in black, to tear holes in our jeans to snort hard drugs and to hate ourselves for believing... our reaction to this too-far-gone silver screen seduction was what the 1990s media had given the nomenclature 'Grunge.'

I turned away from the mirror three times and thrice again... because I did not want to - I was afraid to - awaken. I wanted to stay beyond the portal in Old Hollywood where all the promise of Tinsel Town was true... I wanted to keep believing I - as a child - had never been tricked... but there in that implacable mirror I could not deny what I could see... there sat he, terrifying testimony to our awakening fury; Gilson Simoes in his general's jacket, sipping beer at my expense... Gilson Simoes... the embodiment of all the damage Hollywood has done to me, to you, to every one... all those diners in the restaurant are dead and we can never go back... under the tyranny of time we can only move on... Even Hollywood has to wake up some day and maybe one day, I was thinking, in 1994, maybe one day I will write a book in answer to this very moment... maybe one day in the future I will know what it meant and maybe that is what this story is really all

about, perhaps...

Gilson Simoes did not belong to the silent movie screen and now that my surroundings were finally sinking in, I again could hear him, as loud and defiant as a Los Angeles riot, was Gilson Simoes informing everyone behind and beyond the bar, yelling like a Tinsel Town Cryer:

"Dis girl, is from England, she's my new star! I just discovered her dis afternoon. Say hi to her - all of you! And get her autograph quick. You better believe me, dis girl is gonna be BIG!"

One by one every bartender took and kissed my hand as I perceived in their smiling eyes a gentle reservation only offered to the local schizophrenic or village drunkard.

*Crazy he is, their smiling seemed to say, but harmless after all, just another sleepwalker of Hollywood Boulevard, another Tinsel Town Tragedy... allow him then his reverie...*

In the mirror I adopted a Mona Lisa smile to conceal the mounting irritation in my gut.

"I discovered her today," he kept on shouting, "dis girl is gonna be big, you just watch.... She's gonna be big!"

I knew that my actual role in this animated scenario was nothing more than shotclog to a parasite.

As I swivelled my stool to face the restaurant, all the waxworks seemed to agree; Gilson Simoes was utterly insane and we had all been in Hollywood from the very first call to action...

I never went back to Musso & Frank's again. The Oldest Restaurant in Hollywood recently celebrated One Hundred Years on The Boulevard... and if you look with the right kind of sight, you will see us all in there, on any given night... for we are all still sitting at the bar and at my side is Gilson Simoes, dressed in his general's jacket, drinking a beer at my expense, predicting how one day I - that means me - "she is gonna be 'BIG...'"

But this story is not about me.