

The Vanity

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A Mike Lundy Cross-Time Novel

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Wednesday, October 5th 2011

I was through for the night—it was almost three. I had switched off the computer, grabbed the remains of a Corona, and strolled from my dining room office, through the living room, to the front bay window. I stretched and yawned, staring aimlessly at the fog swirling down N. Bedford toward Sunset Boulevard.

All quiet in the land of the rich and famous.

I drained the last of my beer, ready for bed. But as I was about to turn away, I noticed the orangish-glow of two large, round headlights emerge from the mist. As they neared, I saw that they were attached to a long, dark sedan with suicide doors, running boards, and huge white-walled tires. An old Rolls? A classic Packard? Suffice it to say, it was grand, eccentric, and ominous.

I watched the car slow as it approached my house. The rear passenger window slid down and a woman's face appeared. Through the haze, I could see she wore a fitted, bell-shaped hat—a cloche? She was young and pretty—very pretty. A visitor? Not likely. My

nocturnal caller was probably a tourist—a rich insomniac in search of “Homes of the Stars.” I must have scared her because once she spotted me, she quickly sat back, the window flew up, and the vintage vehicle quietly rolled on, swallowed by the fog. Did she know 726 N. Bedford Drive actually had a Hollywood history? Did I care if she did?

I dropped the empty beer bottle in the recycling bin on my way up to bed.

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A little about this house . The chances are fairly slim that *I* would have bought this place—even if I could have afforded it. But my wife Jeanne liked the older architectural designs, especially the early California and the Art Deco styles. So when she came into some money following her father’s passing, we invested in this spacious—though wanting—derelict dwelling in Beverly Hills. Built in 1925, it was an excellent example of the Spanish-style that was popular in Southern California during the first half of the 20th century. But the house was more than an abandoned architectural find in the fanciful—and expensive—part of L.A. Like I said, it had a past!

Our real estate agent, Judi Kingsley, had done her homework on 726 N. Bedford Drive—well aware that anything she could dig up might help in consummating a deal. So when she revealed this place had ties going back to *silent* films, I knew we were in trouble.

“What?” Jeanne had said, with eyes the size of movie reels.

Judi paused—was that a smirk?—and informed us the house was built by silent film

director, A. Edward Sutherland, who had begun his career playing a Keystone Kop where he met and befriended Charlie Chaplin. Sometime later, during the 1920s, with Chaplin's help, he went into directing at Paramount Studios. Judi recalled that though he had worked with popular actors like W.C. Fields, Esther Ralston, and Robert Armstrong, he was later shunned by the Hollywood community after releasing unseemly and compromising photos of his wife—a popular starlet of the time. As a result of the exposure, the young woman committed suicide.

Jeanne was captivated. I can still hear her. "Oh Mike, it adds such charm to the house. An actual Hollywood director, and a real silent film star. Who knows who else has passed through these doors? What things have happened here!"

Judi wasn't done. She let out a little more line, not quite ready to reel poor Jeanne in yet. "Seems Sutherland, now deep in debt, sold the house with all the furniture to an investment firm who thought they'd hold it for a few years, then sell it. But instead the house lost value as the Depression clobbered the real estate market. Meanwhile, sometime in the early thirties, Sutherland was found murdered." Quickly adding, "...but *not* in this house!"

Judi went on, "The house eventually sold to a P. D. Stephens from Rochester, New York, a

newly appointed regional manager with Kodak's commercial cameras and films in 1937. He'd bought it, lock, stock and barrel. Stephens and his wife lived large in the house for over forty years, hosting parties, mixing with politicians, and schmoozing with celebrities. By the 1980s, they'd both passed away and – having outlived their families – the house was sold off to a speculator whose intention was to flip it for a quick profit. However, he, too, ran head-on into an unsavory market and found himself stuck with an impressive white elephant. Eventually, he abandoned the house and it went into foreclosure. It has sat unoccupied for almost five years."

By now, Judi had 'landed' Jeanne. Within weeks we were homeowners.

Anyway, that's pretty much the history of 726 N. Bedford – or, at least, Judi's version. Obviously, the place was empty and in need of lots of love – and money – when we bought it. That was over eleven years ago.

People buy townhouses in this area for what we put into this place. Our contractor was often seen rubbing his hands together in glee, as his crew of sub-contractors removed dry rot from the floors and walls, re-wired the house, fixed the plumbing, painted the interior and exterior, and refurbished all the Art Deco light fixtures, cornices, baseboards, doors, and five fireplaces.

A few areas were left untouched: a dumbwaiter stretching from the upper master bedroom down to the kitchen remained as it was. The attic, too, was ignored. Also, at the end of the driveway, in the backyard, there was a large, detached, dilapidated, single-car garage, whose exterior may once have matched the style and color of the house. This simple, stucco structure remained more a tribute to wild, unsupervised plant and weed proliferation than a safe haven for a vehicle. Yet, surprisingly, it wasn't as unattractive as it was useless.

Even with these exclusions, the whole restoration project took a year. But it was worth every minute—and every dollar—just to see Jeanne's face the day it was done.

Jeanne and I were married for twenty-one years, and we enjoyed every minute of it—particularly our nine years here.

Yes, *nine* years.

I don't want to dwell on this, so here's the short version. About two years ago, a mammogram missed a small lump in the lymph node under Jeanne's right arm. Weeks later, she began to experience the classic symptoms: swelling, tenderness and pain. We immediately saw her doctor who placed her in the hospital for a complete examination. But, by then, the cancer had developed into the aggressive inflammatory

breast cancer that spreads through the body,
beyond the breast, via the lymph system. Within
a month, Jeanne was gone.

Enough.

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Sleep came quickly and deeply: no visions of exotic, classic cars or young women wearing those flapper-style hats. When I finally awoke around twelve thirty, I knew I had no time for my usual jog through the Hills. I had a lunch date and I needed to move my ass if I were going to make it on time. I rolled out of bed, showered, dressed, ambled downstairs, and checked my calendar on Google: **October 5th Wednesday 1:30 PM - Lunch meeting w/ Darren Chin. The Polo Lounge.**

Darren was one of the chief editors of *The Westwood* and over the past four years, thanks to his support, the magazine had published three of my stories. *The Westwood* had a similar format to *The New Yorker* but in Southern California it outsold the Big Apple's pride and joy by almost three to two. It wasn't as snarky as *The New Yorker*, had equal quality in fiction—I'm thinking better—excellent essays and features, and cost a buck less at the news stand. And now *The Westwood* was about to publish a fourth story of mine, "The Reunion." Hence the meeting at the Polo Lounge. But Darren's most recent email, other than confirming our lunch,

divulged some rather interesting news: he had shown my story to a producer at Warner Bros. Studios who had thought the premise was 'intriguing.' Intriguing? Now there's a 'word' that says nothing. Still, I admit, I was curious to hear Darren's take on what this Warner producer saw in "The Reunion" that was 'intriguing.'

Curious.

I grabbed an apple to squelch the rumblings from an empty stomach, jumped in the Wrangler and took off down N. Bedford Drive toward Sunset Boulevard. It was quarter after one. I arrived a few minutes early. The Polo Lounge is located in the Beverly Hills Hotel which is just north of Rodeo Drive. It has always been a popular watering hole for Hollywood stars and major celebrities going all the way back to the 1920s. Everyone from Douglas Fairbanks and Carole Lombard to Cary Grant and Marilyn Monroe had stayed, eaten *and* drunk there. The hotel isn't that far from my house—less than a mile. It's a nice place but wouldn't have been my choice for lunch. I'd have been just as happy at an In-N-Out Burger.

Anyway, I waited at the bar with a cold Corona, using the time and a damp napkin to jot down a short grocery list that included a bottle of champagne. Why the bubbly? Because HarperCollins had recently called my agent,

Alan Hooper, indicating interest in my new – still-to-be-finished – novel, *Inside Chance...*

“Mike Lundy! How’s the next F. Scott *Fitzpatrick* of Hollywood?”

It was Darren. Gregarious to a fault, he typically arrived a little late and with a little too much enthusiasm. He could have been a model. He wore a baby-blue silk shirt with one button too many unbuttoned at the top. His tan designer slacks probably cost as much as my Jeep. He never wore socks and his russet Italian leather shoes were definitely John Lobb. Thankfully, Darren wore no gold chain necklaces, no fancy sunglasses atop his head – or facing backward – and no diamond stud earring. He was honest, clever, and articulate. But he was flashy, a real talker, and a lousy historian. And I liked him.

“Darren!” We exchanged a friendly high-five. “Good to see you. But, just so you know, it’s *Fitzgerald* and not *Fitzpatrick*. And he bombed in Hollywood. He was an alcoholic, always broke, and dubbed himself a ‘Hollywood hack writer.’”

Darren ordered a rosé spritzer and threw a twenty down on the bar. “How do you know all that stuff, Mike?”

I was about to spout on about F. Scott when an older man appeared, dressed in a tuxedo with menus under his arm. He excused himself for interrupting, smiled and announced our table

was ready. He picked up Darren's drink—I held on to my beer—and once we were settled, Darren raised his glass and with his perfectly bleached teeth gleaming, he toasted, "To the creative spirit!"

"And the *Lakers!*" I chimed in, saluting our local basketball team. We clinked glasses as the waiter arrived. We ordered; and then Darren got serious.

"Let's chat about this short story Alan sent over—'The Reunion.' It's an awesome read, Mike. Some of your *very* best stuff. *The Westwood* is excited about including it in our next issue. And, as you know, I showed it to one of our producers—David Markstein—at Warner Bros. Studios. He thinks it has *definite* possibilities."

We talked through the meal—mostly about "The Reunion" and the movie angle—and I could tell Darren wanted me to make some sort of commitment.

"Look, Darren, this movie thing sounds enticing—even 'intriguing' as you say—but I don't know. I'm a writer. Let's wait, see how your readers respond to "The Reunion"—and then we'll talk. If your Warner friend is still serious, well..."

"And Alan mentioned you may have a book deal in the works with Harper? How about if I talk to the Warner Book Group?" Darren was relentless.

“Whoa, slow down! Alan believes we’d be a good fit with HarperCollins. We’re still working out a few things but we’re optimistic that we can strike a deal.”

One side of Darren’s mouth went up. “Hmmm. Well, we’ll see. We’ll see.”

That sounded rather foreboding.

Darren glanced at his watch. “Look, I gotta jump!” He signaled for the check while pulling out his wallet. The bill arrived almost immediately. He took a quick look, handed the server a small stack of twenties, saying “Keep the difference.” The server’s eyes widened. “Thank you...” Darren extended his hand upward, stopping him from saying anything more. “You have a good day!”

We both rose and single-filed between tables toward the exit. He looked over his shoulder and said, “Seriously, do think about what we talked about today, Mike. *Think* Warner Bros.”

“As you said, we’ll see, Darren, we’ll see. Thanks for lunch.”

He smiled. “I’ll call you if I hear any more from Markstein. Text me – or give a jingle if you have any questions. You got my cell number?”

“Somewhere,” I kidded.

After a brief manly hug, he said, “Keep up the good work, Mike. And I promise to pick up a copy of that Fitzgibbon-guy’s book.”

“That’s *Fitzgerald* and the book is *The Great*

Gats..." But Darren's cell rang and he slapped it to his ear. With his other hand, he made the universal sign for a phone, indicating to stay in touch. A second later, I was staring at his back as he walked away, his free hand now orchestrating the conversation.

Darren. You had to love him.

Now where's that grocery list?

I slapped my pockets before realizing I'd left it on the bar. *List? List? I don't need no stinkin' list!*

A couple of hours later, shopping done – some items surely forgotten – champagne safely in the fridge, I sat at my dining room 'desk' with a beer, feet up, and let out a sigh. I was looking forward to an evening with my Muse – Molly – the only woman in my life.

Or so I thought.

