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Opening Extract from...

Mystery

Written by Jonathan Kellerman

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1

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1

LIKE A con man on the run, LA buries its past.

Maybe that's why no one argued when the sentence came down: The Fauborg had to die.

I live in a company town where the product is illusion. In the alternate universe ruled by sociopaths who make movies, communication means snappy dialogue, the scalpel trumps genetics, and permanence is mortal sin because it slows down the shoot.

LA used to have more Victorian mansions than San Francisco but LA called in the wrecking ball and all that handwork gave way to thirties bungalows that yielded to fifties dingbats, which were vanquished, in turn, by big-box adult dormitories with walls a toddler can put a fist through.

Preservationists try to stem the erosion but end up fighting for the likes of gas stations and ticky-tack motels. Money changes hands, zoning laws are finessed, and masterpieces like the Ambassador Hotel dissolve like wrinkles shot with Botox.

The Fauborg Hotel was no Ambassador but it did have its charm. Four somber stories of Colonial brick-face, it sat on a quiet block of Crescent Drive in Beverly Hills, wedged between a retirement home and a dry cleaner. A short walk but a psychic universe from the Eurotrash cafés of Canon Drive and the shopping frenzy on Beverly and Rodeo, the Fauborg appeared in few guidebooks but managed to boast one of the highest occupancy rates in the city.

Built in 1949 by a French Holocaust survivor, its design aped the mansions in the American movies that had transfixed Marcel Jabotinsky as a teenager. Jabotinksy's first guests were other postwar émigrés seeking peace and quiet. That same desire for low-key serenity continued with the hotel's clientele, divided between the genteel grandparents of Eurotrash and the odd knowledgeable American willing to trade glitz and edgy and ironic for a decent night's sleep.

I knew the Fauborg because I drank there. The lounge at the back was smallish and dim with nothing to prove, paneled in dark rift oak and hung with middling Barbizon landscapes. The eighty-year-old hunchback behind the bar concocted the best Sidecar in town and Robin likes Sidecars. An assortment of pianists, mostly former studio musicians on pension, worked the big black Steinway in the left-hand corner, never intruding upon the pleasant buzz of conversation and the harmonious clink of crystal glasses. The staff was attentive without being nosy, the snacks were decent, and you left the place feeling as if you'd been recivilized.

Robin and I spent a lot of Sunday evenings in a cracked leather rear booth, holding hands, nibbling on cheese crackers, and inhaling Gershwin.

One Saturday morning in the spring, Robin was delivering a new guitar to an aging rock star who lived in the flats of Beverly Hills and the drive took her past the Fauborg. A sign strung up over the fanlight announced:

LAST NIGHT TOMORROW:
COME CELEBRATE – OR MOURN – WITH US.
THANKS FOR THE GOOD TIMES.

The Family of Marcel Jabotinsky

Robin shouldn't have been surprised; the previous week we'd shown up at a Thai place we'd enjoyed for half a decade only to find an abyss

surrounded by chain-link where the building had stood. The month before that, she'd run into an old high school friend and asked how her husband was.

'Which one?'

'Jeff.'

The woman laughed. 'Jeff's ancient history, sweetie. Cliff's recent history but he's gone, too.'

Tissue paper city.

Robin said, 'Not much of a choice, is it? Surrender to the inevitable or risk a whole bunch of mawkish nostalgia.'

We sat on the living-room couch with Blanche, our little French bulldog, squeezed between us and following the back-and-forth.

I said, 'I can go either way.'

She pulled on a curl, let it spring back. 'What the heck, I'll never get a Sidecar that good and it's a chance to put on a dress.'

'I'll wear a suit.'

'I like you in a suit, darling. But not the black one. Let's pretend it won't be a funeral.'

Who knew?

2

WE SHOWED up at nine p.m. The light behind the fanlight was dingy.

Crescent Drive was depopulated except for a man with a walkie-talkie leaning against a parking meter just north of the hotel. Thirties, tall, broad, with short yellow hair, he flashed us a slit-eyed appraisal before returning to watching the empty street.

His suit was black and it draped his bulk uneasily. An interesting bulge swelled his breast pocket, a spiral cord ran from an earpiece down the back of his collar.

Robin whispered, 'If someone needs serious guarding, where are the paparazzi?'

I said, 'Good question. They swarm like blowflies at the first whiff of moral decay.'

'Some flies are kept like pets. Once I was delivering a mandolin to Bite and sat in his kitchen as his publicist phoned the paps to tell them where The Star would be for lunch.'

Something made me turn back to Mr Black Suit. His head jerked away quickly and he studied the sidewalk; he'd been watching us. Despite the theatrical apathy, his shoulders were tight, his profile less animate than Rushmore.

We must've lingered too long because he half turned and stared. Robin smiled and gave a fluttery finger-wave. Her curls were wild, copper-bright in the moonlight, her dress a tight black tulip, set off by red stilettos.

Usually that has its effect.

Black Suit was no exception and he smiled back. Then he stopped himself, returned to reviewing the pavement.

Robin said, 'Guess I'm losing my touch.'

'He's a robot.'

'I used to be good with machines.'

A push of the brass door leading to the Fauborg's lobby plunged us into a sooty, demi-darkness that turned the damson-plum carpeting to soil-brown. All the furniture was gone, no one worked the desk, gray rectangles marked the walls where paintings had been removed.

One thing hadn't changed: the familiar olfactory stew of roasted meat, disinfectant, and grassy French perfume.

The ancient air conditioner thumped the ceiling at odd intervals but the air was close, musty, dank.

Robin squeezed my arm. 'This might be a bad idea.'

'Want to leave?'

'You and me quitters? Not in our DNA.'

Half the light fixtures had been removed from the lounge. The room was a cave. As my eyes adjusted, I made out the overstuffed leather and green plaid seating. Here, too, the artwork was gone.

Same for the big black Steinway with its gigantic brandy snifter for tips. Tinny music seeped into the room from an unseen speaker. An easy-listening FM station. As we stood waiting to be seated, Barry Manilow was replaced by a commercial for auto insurance.

Like pedestrians in a fog, the other patrons materialized gradually. A group of handsome white-haired people in their sixties who looked as if they'd driven in from San Marino, a quartet of well-dressed continental types ten years older, both men wearing ascots.

One exception to the maturity motif: two tables from our usual corner a young woman in white sat alone, checking her watch every fifteen seconds.

No one came forward to greet us and we settled behind a scarred coffee table stripped of snacks, flowers, candles.

The insurance commercial ran on. Glass rattled from the bar.

Gustave wasn't bent over the slab of polished oak. In his place, a grim, big-chested brunette who looked as if she'd finally given up on a film career mixed what looked like a standard Martini while consulting a cheat-sheet. The concept of gin with a splash of vermouth seemed overwhelming and she grimaced. Clots of moisture created tiny reflecting pools along the bar-top as her fumbling fingers spilled as much booze as they splashed into the glass. She took a deep breath, reached for an olive, shook her head, and put it back in the bowl, health code be damned.

Her third attempt at carving a lemon twist was partially successful and she handed the drink to a server I'd never seen before. Looking too young to be allowed in a place where spirits flowed, he had floppy dishwater hair, a soft chin, and a dangerously overgrown bow tie. His red jacket was a flimsy cotton rental, his black pants ended an inch too soon.

White socks.

Black tennis shoes.

Ralph, the Fauborg's waiter for decades, had never deviated from an impeccable shawl-lapel tux, starched white shirt, plaid cummerbund, and patent-leather bluchers.

Ralph was nowhere to be seen, ditto for Marie, the middle-aged Savannah belle who split busy shifts and offered naughty one-liners with refills.

Red Jacket brought the Martini toward the young woman in white, plodding cautiously like a five-year-old ring-bearer. When he arrived, she dipped her head coquettishly and said something. He scurried back to the bar, returned with three olives and a pearl onion on a saucer.

As the commercial shifted to a pitch for the latest Disney movie, Red Jacket continued to linger at the girl's table, schmoozing with his back to us. She wasn't much older than him, maybe twenty-five, with a sweet oval face and huge eyes. A white silk mini-dress bared sleek legs that tapered into backless silver pumps. A matching silk scarf, creamy as

fresh milk, encircled her face. The head covering didn't fit the skimpy dress; winter on top, summer on the bottom.

Her bare arms were smooth and pale, her lashes too long to be real. She used them to good effect on the waiter.

The watch on her right arm sparkled with diamonds as she consulted it again. The waiter made no attempt to leave as she pulled something out of a white clutch. Ivory cigarette holder that she rolled slowly between slender fingers.

Robin said, 'Someone's channeling Audrey Hepburn.'

The girl crossed her legs and the dress rode up nearly crotch-high. She made no attempt to smooth it.

I said, 'Audrey was a lot more subtle.'

'Then someone else from that era. Hey, maybe she's who Dudley Do-Right's guarding.'

I looked around the room. 'Can't see anyone else who'd fit.'

'Someone that cute all alone?'

'She's waiting for someone,' I said. 'That's the fifth time she checked her watch.'

'Maybe that's why I thought of Audrey. *Roman Holiday*, poor little princess all on her lonesome.' She laughed and snuggled against me. 'Listen to us. The chance to be together and we're messing in someone else's business.'

The girl produced a cigarette, fit it into the holder, licked the ivory tip before inserting it between her lips and half smiling at the waiter.

He fumbled in his pockets, shook his head. Out of her clutch came an ivory lighter that she held out to him. He lit her up. She inhaled greedily.

No smoking in bars has been California law for years. When the girl in white created haze, no one protested. A moment later, someone across the room was also blowing nicotine. Then two more orange dots materialized. Then four.

Soon the place was hazy and toxic and oddly pleasant for that. The commercial ended. Music resumed. Some imitation of Roberta Flack being killed softly.

Robin and I had been ignored for nearly ten minutes while Red Jacket lingered with the girl in white. When she turned away from him and began concentrating on her Martini, he returned to the bar, chatted with the befuddled brunette.

Robin laughed. 'I am *definitely* losing my touch.'

'Want to go?'

'And lower my odds for lung cancer? Perish.'

'Okay, I'll go educate Surfer Joe.'

'Be gentle, darling. He's still wrestling with puberty.'

As I stood, the barkeep said something to Red Jacket and he swiveled. Mouthed an O.

Loping over, he grinned. 'Hey. You just get here?'

Robin said, 'Seconds ago.'

'Great . . . er . . . so . . . welcome to the Fowlburg. Can I get you guys something?'

'We guys,' I said, 'will have a Sidecar on the rocks with light sugar on the rim, and Chivas neat, water on the side.'

'A Sidecar,' he said. 'That's a drink, right? I mean, it's not a sandwich. 'Cause the kitchen's basically closed, we just got nuts and crackers.'

'It's a drink,' I said. 'Any wasabi peas left?'

'There's no vegetables anywhere.'

'That's a bar snack. Peas coated with wasabi.'

Blank look.

Despite Robin's soft elbow in my ribs, I said, 'Wasabi's that green horseradish they put on sushi.'

'Oh,' he said. 'We don't got sushi.'

'We'll just take whatever you have.'

'I think we got almonds.' He ticked a finger. 'Okay, so it's Champagne and a . . . Sidecar.'

'A Sidecar and Chivas,' I said. 'That's a blended whisky.'

'Sure. Of course.' Slapping his forehead. 'I never did this before.'

'You're kidding.'

Robin kicked my shin.

'A Sidecar,' he said, repeating it again in a mumble. 'They just called from the temp agency yesterday, said there's a place closing down, you got five hours to get over there if you want it, Neil. Mostly I work in places with no drinking.'

'McDonald's?' I said.

Kick kick kick.

'That was in the beginning,' said Neil. 'Then I did two years at Marie Callender's.' Grin. 'All the pie you can eat, man I was getting fat. Then I lost that and signed up with the temp agency and they sent me here. Too bad it's only one night. This is a cool old place.'

'Sure is. Too bad they're tearing it down.'

'Yeah . . . but that's the way it is, right? Old stuff dies.'

'We'll take those drinks, now. And those almonds, if you have them.'

'Last time I checked we did, but you never know.'

As he turned to leave, the girl in white slipped on oversized, gold-framed sunglasses with lenses so dark they had to be blinding her. Sucking on her cigarette, she twirled the holder, stretched coltish legs, ran a finger along the side of a clean, smooth jaw. Licked her lips.

Red Jacket watched her, transfixed.

Robin said, 'She is beautiful, Neil.'

He wheeled. 'So are you, ma'am. Um . . . oh, man, sorry, that came out weird. Sorry.'

Robin touched his hand. 'Don't worry about it, dear.'

'Um, I better get you those drinks.'

When he was gone, I said, 'See, you've still got it going on.'

'He probably looks at me like I'm his mother.'

I hummed 'Mrs Robinson.' She kicked me harder. But not enough to hurt. Our relationship's not that complicated.