

A MATTER OF TIME

Edward Lewis

HOLLYWOOD

Hollywood isn't built on a foundation of reality. I live among would-be writers, actors, and directors who have come to LA from all parts of the country, seeking fame and fortune. They wait on tables, as I did, in less than elegant restaurants, sleep in cramped apartments, and share stories about having just lost out at an audition, or how a studio is about to green-light a film that they've written. It's simply a matter of time before the big break turns everything around.

One day, while I was serving him dinner, a customer asked me how things were going. I said I was having trouble finding an affordable place to live. It turned out he was a real estate agent, and had a listing in Malibu.

"The owner doesn't seem anxious to sell, which means that I have to drive out and check that things are in order. I'll make you a deal. Move in rent-free, all you have to do is baby sit the place."

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For two months I lived every wannabe's fantasy. Even my screenplay seemed to be working; it was my first try at writing one since I left home. In a few days I'd be ready for

some feedback. I was dating one of the waitresses where I worked; her name was Marilyn, and she was a film student at UCLA. I'd give it to her to read it.

Saturdays I worked late. When I pulled up to the beach house there was a light in the upstairs bedroom. I took a flashlight out of the glove compartment, opened the front door, and climbed the stairs. In the tradition of the worst cops-and-robbers movies, I burst through the door and flashed my light on the bed. A paunchy, middle-aged man in his birthday suit jumped up, his bedmate, a starlet prototype, screamed like she'd seen a ghost.

"I'm the caretaker," I announced.

"I'm the owner!" the man bellowed. "Get your ass off the property! Now!"

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I was lucky. The place I'd been renting, a maid's room and bath in a modest mid-Wilshire house, was still available. I got back to work after a while, and gave Marilyn the script. She said it had promise, which I took to mean she was less than impressed. I quit working on it and went to a lot of movies.

One day the manager of a neighborhood theater invited me to a script reading by a once famous German director who was hoping to make it into his debut American film. The script was based on an old Austrian play, and felt dated. I thought I could do better. My version of the play did turn out to be better, and the director used it to assemble a cast as diverse as acts in a vaudeville show. The studios all turned it down, and he gave up.

Occasionally there'd be an article in the trades about someone no one ever heard of, getting a movie made. I decided to take a crack at setting it up myself. The artists agreed to defer their salaries, which meant the budget was a low eighty-thousand dollars. A small distributor finally agreed to bankroll it. The day we started shooting was the first time I'd ever been on a sound stage.

A week after the film opened, the distributor folded; the movie sank into instant oblivion. There was no question it was a setback, but the important thing was I was now a genuine Producer. It turned out to be meaningless. I couldn't get an appointment with even a minor executive, at any studio.

Wannabes almost always serve life sentences.

DISRAELI'S AUDACITY

There is an unwritten agreement between the military and the major studios: in return for making films that portrayed them in a favorable light, the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps would provide planes, tanks, warships, armaments, uniforms, technical support and troops, all gratis. The largesse was worth millions of dollars, without which war films, often a cash cow, would be too expensive to produce.

As a result, a novel that was number one on the New York Times' Best Seller List was still on the market. The book, entitled *Until Death*, told the story of a war hero denied the Congressional Medal of Honor because he was gay. The Pentagon hated it, so the studios all passed. I optioned it for next to nothing. Now I needed a professional screenwriter.

Good writers were expensive, far beyond my reach, but the House Un-American Activities Committee's campaign to cleanse the motion picture industry of its left-wing radicals, had a by-product: screenplays were being written under pseudonyms by blacklisted writers forced to work for a fraction of their normal fees. You could say they were being taken advantage of, exploited; you could also say they were the victims of an injustice, and that giving them work was a decent thing to do. I opted for the latter hypothesis.

Driven into menial jobs, some went into exile out of the country. A column in *Variety* mentioned that Charles Howard, once one of the highest paid scripters in the business, was living in an expat community outside of Guadalajara, Mexico. With nothing to lose, I flew to Mexico.

Older and shorter than I expected, Howard's large head reminded me of the bust of Beethoven that sat on top of my mother's piano. A full head of white hair and a distinguished white mustache suggested reserve and dignity, but a parrot was perched on his shoulder.

"My drinking companion," he announced.

He told me his wife was at work, his daughter at school, and led me around the back of the house to a small building that had been converted from a tool shed into an office. He put the bird on a table that held a dish of water, some seeds, lettuce, and an empty shot glass. It flapped its wings, apparently unable to fly. Another table, converted to a bar, held a bottle of gin, some vermouth, and a martini shaker Howard told me he brought with him from L.A. A cardboard nameplate attached to the table read: "Celebrity Bar."

"My first job was in MGM's Shorts Department," he explained. "A church nearby had a clock tower that tolled the hours. The stroke of five was like the starter's gun at a track meet. We closed our typewriters, and in a few minutes were at the Celebrity Bar in heated discussions about the state of the world."

He indicated a chair:

"But you didn't come to Mexico to hear me reminisce. If I like your project I'm available for hire. Cheap, as I'm sure you know."

I took the book out of my briefcase, and handed it to him. He glanced at the cover, and nodded:

"Best Seller. Helen works at a hospital. If a visitor leaves the *Sunday NY Times*, I browse the Book Section."

He turned to the last page in the book, and skimmed it rapidly.

"It's a small book and I'm a fast reader. Your flight couldn't have been very comfortable. If you feel like stretching your legs, it's a good walk around the lake. You'll have your answer when you get back."

* * *

He was making some notes when I returned.

“It won’t be easy,” he told me, “but it can make a first rate film. Do you want to hear the problems I think need to be solved?”

“I’d rather read your solutions.”

“Then let’s proceed with business. It’s awkward without an agent.”

“I don’t know what writers in your situation are paid.”

“Five Thousand dollars is par for the course. Sometimes free rewrites are included.”

“I’ll manage to come up with the money if more work is needed.”

Charles thrust out his hand:

“Done.”

“There’s also the matter of credit,” I reminded him.

He shrugged:

“Pick a name out of the phone book, then misspell it.”

Simple I thought, why not, and asked when he could start the script.

“The only thing I’m working on is the familiar novel many unemployable writers with nothing better to do struggle with. I’m good to go.”

He prepared two martinis: a few carefully measured drops of dry vermouth swirled around inside the shaker, three jiggers of gin, then vigorously shaken and poured.

“A toast to seal the bargain. I don’t mean ‘bargain’ in a literal sense. It’s too soon to know what I’m worth. I haven’t yet figured out the ending to my own novel.”

“Can I ask what it’s about?”

“A memoir of sorts. My hope is that I might gain an insight into the mystery that plagues me: who ratted me out to the House Un-American Activities Committee. I’ve been imagining what I’d do if I succeed. Just confronting the bastard won’t be enough.”

The parrot started squawking. Charles poured a few drops of gin into the shot glass, diluted it with water, and offered it to the bird.

“Only way to shut him up.”

“Did you bring the parrot with you when you moved here?”

He shook his head, and pointed to the one window in the shed, small and high up.

“He crashed against that window, broke a wing. He’d be a goner outside.”

He held his glass up, and proposed a toast:

“To making our way successfully through the minefield that threatens every project that has even the hint of an anti-establishment point of view.”

We sipped our drinks.

“And a special nod to Benjamin Disraeli, who wrote: ‘Success is the child of audacity.’”

“I have a question I’d like to ask you. Maybe it’s something you’d rather not talk about.”

“If it is I’ll be sure to let you know. It wouldn’t be the first time I refused to answer a question.”

“How did you learn you were being blacklisted?”

“A studio head, worried that my name was on an expensive film about to hit the theatres, called me in to tell me that an informant ratted me out to the House Committee. ‘Not to worry,’ he says. ‘A private meeting with an attorney, a few questions, and you’re cleared.’ The deal was doublespeak for name names, as basic as a jockstrap. I tell the studio boss I enjoy talking politics, and look forward to the meeting. He didn’t expect it to be so easy, and says: ‘I’ll set it up.’ I ask about the fee. He tells me there is no fee. Those of us who were targets of the witch-hunt grew sophisticated pretty fast about legal matters. I knew that anything discussed with a lawyer who’s being paid, is privileged, confidential like a confession to a priest or a visit to a doctor. I insist on paying the lawyer’s standard rate. End of meeting. End of any chance of working in Hollywood again. But enough about me; you must be anxious for me to get to work.”

I was, but I also hated to leave.

* * *

Six weeks later the script arrived. What had been primarily an expose of prejudice in the military, was now a moving story that dealt with issues beyond homophobia.

A note was attached to the last page:

Sadly my feathered drinking partner has moved on to what I hope is a better situation. Yet another mystery to be solved. Left as he always was, the door closed, no way to reach the barely opened window, but gone! Helen said its wing must not have

been broken. 'Doctors make mistakes like that all the time,' she told me. For days I couldn't work. Until I had to confront the Committee, I always imagined confidently that I was in charge of my own destiny. Now I am the sport of circumstances beyond my control. Where had the parrot come from? Why to me? How did it get out of the shed? I had no answers, only questions. I was in that state of mind where logic no longer held sway. Then suddenly I saw the solution to what had been a basic flaw in our story. If you like the script, raise your glass to the bird who reminded me that uncertainty is a precursor to knowledge.'

I called Charles to congratulate him, and put his check in the mail. It felt a little like when I handed some change or sometimes a sandwich I couldn't finish, to the homeless guy who hung around outside a coffee shop I frequented. For a moment you think you've done something decent, but you know that when you're back in your comfortable digs, he'll still be there begging and homeless.

My bank balance was now close to zero. I had to make the movie happen. The one sure way was to get a major star. I may not have had much of a shot, but Disraeli's audacity is in the public domain.

BOBBLE HEAD

Before Hollywood discovered Brandon Wells, he played semi-pro football and performed in rodeo circuits. The story went that Universal Pictures was shooting a western in New Mexico that starred one of their top grossers. The hero, a cowboy falsely arrested, had broken out of jail, retrieved his horse, and was attempting to elude the police

by climbing a rugged mountain range beyond which lay freedom. The terrain made it too dangerous for the star to do his own riding, so a double was used for everything except close-ups. During one shot the horse stumbled, threw its rider, and broke the stuntman's leg. The director was desperate. One of the wranglers, a local, told him that a guy in the rodeo currently in town was the right size, could sit a horse, and had guts. The cowboy was Brandon Wells.

To save hiring a bit-player, they gave him a few lines. He delivered them in one take, and the director offered him a small part in his next picture. Two weeks into that shoot, a studio executive sat in at a screening of the dailies, the nightly viewing of film shot the previous day. An ambitious lady who would go on to become head of production, she had a sharp eye for talent. She instructed the director to beef up the bit-player's role. Within two years he was a star.

Producers with limited stature approach actors through their agent. Brandon Wells was represented by a talent agency called The Dan Thomas Group. I brought the script to their office, a Spanish bungalow in Beverly Hills, hoping they'd give it to him to read. The reception area displayed Thomas' diplomas from USC and Stanford Law School, and photographs of the agent posed with prominent politicians.

The receptionist told me they didn't accept scripts without a signed release form, and handed me one. I skimmed over what was actually a license to steal. If they rejected the script, they couldn't be held liable for anything that showed up later in a movie written by someone else, even if the story or dialogue was a blatant copy. I signed the form, and handed her the script, being sure to let her know it was based on a best seller.

* * *

Wells knew the screenplay was too good to have been written by an unknown. He wanted to meet with the author. I called Charles. He'd have to be the one to decide what to do.

"I haven't a clue how he'll react when he finds out the writer is blacklisted, but what the hell, we have to see where we stand some time or other. He's been open about supporting some pretty decent organizations. I can be in LA to-morrow."

I met him at the airport, and drove him to Wells' house. I expected a hilltop mansion on one of the narrow roads that wind their way around Bel Air, but it turned out to be a large, but not grand, English Tudor, at the end of a relatively modest residential street. That I wasn't asked to attend the meeting, was one of the protocols that defined industry hierarchy, like which table you got at an 'in' restaurant, or where you sat if you could get a ticket to an awards show.

There was a small motel on Sunset Boulevard not far from the actor's house. I gave Charles the phone number, and said I'd pick him up when the meeting was over. I sat in the lobby and browsed through the *New York Times*; that they didn't display the Los Angeles paper was meant to show their sophistication. The phone call never came. Instead Charles walked in, a broad smile on his face.

"His secretary drove me here."

He ordered a martini, and gave me his report.

"I like to think I can read a person pretty fast, what he thinks about himself and what he thinks about me, but that wasn't the case this time. Wells' chair faced a large mirror that hung on the wall. Like an actor studying his performance, he focused more on it than on me. When he smiled, I suspected it was because he felt he had successfully conveyed an impression he wanted to make."

I was anxious to know the bottom line.

"Is he demanding a rewrite?"

"No. He told me it was the best script he's read in years."

"I don't get it. Why did he insist on the meeting?"

"My sense is that he needs to be in control of whatever he's working on. I'm betting his reps will be sizing you up next. A little advice?"

"I'm open to all the help I can get."

"If a stallion senses that his mount is afraid, he's impossible to ride."

* * *

Dan Thomas' secretary called the next day, and asked me to be in the office at five o'clock. She urged me to be on time.

The super-agent sat behind a huge mahogany desk; his blond hair framed features that were Barrymore-like. An assistant asked if I wanted an Espresso or Perrier. I shook my head and thanked him. When he walked out, Thomas asked me if I owned the book. I told him I had an option for two years, renewable for a third.

“You could have picked a better name for the screenwriter.” He held up his hand before I could reply: “I forgot. Your writer told Brandon that he asked you to pick one out of the phone book. Original. Normally they select their own pseudonyms. It’s interesting, check it out: you’ll find I’m correct, as much as they think they’re disguising their own names, they always end up with an obvious connection. The initials, or some combination of letters that resemble the real name. It’s the same with criminals who are picking an alias. My theory is they want to be recognized. Your writer broke the mold. He has a reputation for being smart.”

I nodded:

“He’s the best in the business.”

He wasn’t interested in my opinion.

“Your script is anti-American, subversive, but it’s difficult for me to say ‘no’ to Brandon. What did you pay for it?” Again he raised his hand. “Never mind. Damn little I’m sure. I love that we’re screwing him. What makes it even better, he knows he’s getting it up the ass. No money, no credit. All the profit going to fucking capitalists.”

He couldn’t restrain a laugh:

“I’ve sent the script to Larry Williams, another client of mine. Brandon wants him to direct. If everything falls into place Brandon’s company will produce the film. You’ll get Associate Producer credit, and a fee.”

I was in no position to argue, and walked out of the office head down. I could see the Russian doll with a bobbing head that I picked up at a garage sale. I was being disgustingly passive, if truth be told, cowardly; not much different from those in the industry who were nodding, afraid of being caught in the House Committee’s net.

VASELINE

Out of the blue, I got invited to a barbecue at Dan Thomas' estate. Marilyn had gotten a job with Public Television when she graduated, and I figured she'd want to meet him, but she couldn't come. UCLA's Center for Jewish Studies had a demonstration scheduled the same day to protest the publication of a blatantly anti-Semitic journal written by some psychology professor.

I was the first guest to arrive. A butler led me into a room that looked out onto a swimming pool and tennis court. The room itself could have been a movie set for a Victorian Pub: red-flocked wallpaper, a whisky stained hardwood bar, etched mirrors, and a solid brass foot rail.

"Someone will be down shortly," he said, and left.

In a few minutes a woman entered. She needed no introduction: Harriet Wilson was the star of a popular TV tabloid crime show. I learned later that she often acted as hostess when Dan Thomas entertained guests.

"Dan will be just a minute."

There was something unpleasant about the way her mouth curled up in a habitual sneer when she talked.

Dan Thomas walked in, dressed in fashionable black; the young man just behind him wore crisp white slacks and a white shirt. Thomas introduced him as a promising actor, and said he'd be our bartender. He handed me a glass, and poured champagne, Dom Perignon.

Brandon Wells and his wife arrived next. Conversation wasn't easy, and it was a relief when Charles Howard joined us. His daughter, Jane, was with him. She was pretty in a plain sort of way, but looked fragile, like a bird. I guessed she had her mother's genes.

Wells raised his glass in a toast:

"To a man who had the strength to remain true to his ideals."

I assumed he was referring to Charles' not having caved in to the House Committee.

The Williams' finally showed up. Six feet two at least, with Hollywood good looks, Larry Williams had the swagger of a successful player on the industry stage. His wife seemed different: Her name was Linda, and she reminded me of Dorothy McGuire, my favorite actress.

Larry quickly took over the conversation, holding forth about his recent return from Paris where he and Linda lived for two years:

"Dan sent me this fabulous project. It was a chance to work with Brandon again."

That turned out not to be true. He hated working with actors who were demanding, and Wells was at the top of the list. Larry did the movie because he had recently bought a villa in Mexico and needed the money.

I don't know how many times my champagne glass was refilled, but things got pretty hazy. I have a vague picture in my mind of Charles' daughter and Larry's wife going into a kind of locker room, and coming out carrying tennis rackets and balls. On the court, Linda is beating the bejesus out of Jane. Williams comes over and puts his arm around Jane, showing her how to hit a backhand using both hands. I didn't remember her being particularly short, and I hadn't really stood that close to Larry, but he towers over her in a way that's threatening.

I joined the line at the barbecue, was handed a plate with a steak and a cob of corn, and took a vacant seat that I spotted next to Linda. Her husband was seated two tables away, and she kept her eyes glued on him like one of the radar guns police use to catch someone breaking the rules. Except that cops are hoping someone does, and Linda's eyes betrayed the opposite. I felt sorry for her.

To lighten things up I told her about Charles Howard's favorite drinking partner, his parrot. She smiled and told me about another parrot, a parakeet actually, that she found lying on the road in the middle of traffic.

"I kept it until we moved to Paris."

We toasted both birds with a refill of the Dom Perignon. I wanted to tell her that I really liked her, but got tongue-tied and settled on playing it safe:

“How did you and Larry meet?”

“He was casting a film to be shot in Paris. One of the parts called for an American exchange student. The casting director went to the same gym I did. I got the job.”

“Had you acted before?”

“Not really. When I was young I sang in a band.”

“It was a little like that for me. I wrote sketches for school plays. My mother warned me that didn’t mean Hollywood was waiting for me.”

“I never knew my mother.”

“That’s rough. I’m sorry.”

She shrugged:

“My father raised me. We moved around a lot.”

“Did you like Paris?”

“I did. I worked in a few local films. Not big parts, but it was fun.”

I told her a little about the screenplay I was working on.

“It’s turned into a Hollywood who-done-it. The characters are based on people I’ve met here. It wouldn’t surprise me if you end up being one of them.”

* * *

Thomas announced it was time to get to work. Harriet Wilson had footage too racy to show on the air; she was going to run it for the women while the men talked business. I made my way to a smoking tent set up on the far end of the patio. A box of Cuban cigars was on a table outside the entrance. I’m not crazy about the smell of cigar smoke, but if you want to advance yourself in show business you go with the flow.

Dan Thomas tells us we’re here to air any questions we have about *Until Death*. Larry talks about how we’re in the business of making motion pictures. He emphasizes the word ‘motion,’ and says the script needs more action, more blood and guts, but that he can take care of that.

Brandon brings up the business of Charles and the House Un-American Activities Committee. His words are directed to Larry Williams, the only one who may not have known about what was going on politically in America. Williams says he didn’t follow the hearings, has no interest in politics, and doesn’t care one way or the other.

Cinematographers coat the lens of a camera with Vaseline to soften focus. Alcohol does the same to the human brain, but it wears off more quickly. I only vaguely remember the early part of the evening, but I heard Dan Thomas, loud and clear, when he told us that with everyone aboard, the package wouldn't take long to set up.

SHAKESPEARE AND DOSTOYEVSKY

Parts of *Until Death* take place in the nation's capital. Permits to film there are issued by the Police Department, a kind of subsidiary of the Pentagon. Political clout would be needed. Dan Thomas called Senator Dustin Wallace, one of the big shots in the photos on display at his office. The senator listened politely, but he was considering running for the presidency, and wasn't about to alienate the military. Larry said not to worry; he could steal the shots we needed.

A skeleton crew took the red eye to Washington. My job was to see to it that we were on a flight back that same day, with the film. The first priority was getting an establishing shot of our star entering the Pentagon.

A hand-held camera was set up in the back of a rented station wagon; the windows were draped, a small hole allowed access to the lens. Our grip, about the same size as Wells, had been fitted with a rented officer's uniform. Photographed from the back as he climbed the steps to the entrance, he returned the salute of an unsuspecting enlisted man. We were out of there in three minutes flat.

Everything went just as smoothly outside Walter Reed Hospital, our last destination. But Larry wasn't satisfied.

"Come with me," he told me.

He got out of the wagon, and strode into the hospital like he had every reason to be there. Two secret service agents were just inside the door. The one in charge held up his hand as we walked in.

“No visitors to-day. You’ll have to leave.”

He was good looking, and could have been chosen by a Hollywood casting agent. He was also soft spoken for a military man. I saw Van Heflin, the classic number two guy who never gets the girl.

Larry introduced himself:

“I’ve got a small crew outside. We’re filming a documentary for Senator Wallace. He’s coming before the finance committee for funds to upgrade military hospitals. The film will be a big help.”

“Dustin’s a good guy,” the agent told us. “I eagled him his last trip to the Middle East. Surprised he doesn’t know the Vice President is checked in for his annual physical.”

“He’s got a lot on his plate,” Larry explained. “Hasn’t announced yet, but he’s thinking seriously about running for the top job.”

The agent checked his watch.

“The veep naps every day from two to three, rain or shine.”

“Fifteen minutes is all we need,” Larry assured him.

The agent hesitated a moment, then nodded:

“Agent Harrington will escort you.”

“Thanks. Can I put a gown on him and use him in the shot?”

The agent signaled Harrington to stay put: “I’m ready for my close-up.”

I got the grip and the camera from the car, on the double.

Fifteen minutes turned into fifty before we quit. The agent escorted us to the door.

“If you have a cast rollup at the end of the film, name’s Harold Randolph. With an ‘f’ instead of ‘ph.’”

Premature celebration is considered bad luck, so there was no cheering until the plane took off. Larry pumped his fist: “Yes! The hospital sequence might just turn out to

be a highlight. I'd give anything to be there when the brass see the movie and realize they actually helped us film it."

I felt a little sorry for the agent. He was sure to get his butt kicked.

The next day, the company moved to where the Vietnamese scenes were to be filmed: the foothills of the Sierra Mountains, an hour north of Sacramento.

In the first sequence, a sergeant, leading his sniper squad, plants a stick of dynamite, a fuse, and a cigarette lighter where they can be easily seen. A peasant, bicycling by, dismounts and picks up the dynamite. The sergeant orders one member of his squad, Private Brand, to shoot the peasant. He hesitates, but follows orders. Shots from a nearby village ring out, and a firefight rages. The squad is saved by the bravery of Corporal Henderson, (Wells), but Brand is seriously wounded.

The rain hit us before we could set up for the next scene. It lasted through the night and the next day, forcing us to move into an empty warehouse that was converted into a cover set.

Wells seemed unusually tense when he walked onto the warehouse stage, on which were replicas of adjoining rooms in Walter Reed Hospital. He looked at where the camera was set up, shook his head, and pointed to a different spot: "The camera should be there."

He turned and walked back to his trailer.

Williams waited until the actor was gone, then told the cameraman not to change anything. It would have taken half an hour to move the camera and reset the lights. In thirty minutes he told the assistant director to notify the actor they were ready for him.

Wells returned to the set, stared at the camera, then walked slowly over to Williams. For a few seconds he stood facing the director calmly, then reached over, clenched him in both hands, lifted him off his feet, and like a window dresser moving a display mannequin, carried him over to where he'd said the camera should be. He held him there off the ground a moment, then deposited him on the spot.

"I said the camera belongs here."

He stalked off. When he was out of earshot, Larry muttered to the assistant director: "I'll kill the son-of-a-bitch."

The camera was moved to where the star said it should be.

* * *

The last scene of the day was inside one of the rooms. Private Brand lies in a hospital bed. A Major enters the room.

"I'll get right to the point, Private. Your squad leader, Sergeant Crawford, has written a report that accuses you of killing an unarmed civilian. You could spend the rest of your life in the stockade. But there's a way charges might be dropped. Your 'friend' Corporal Henderson has a date with the Commander-in-Chief. The whole world will see the President hanging a Medal of Honor around the neck of a faggot. Can you picture our enemies laughing themselves silly? You could do your country a service. You'd be rewarded, have no doubt about that. Master Sergeant Brand sounds real good. Rolls right off the tongue. All you have to do is remember that the faggot Henderson held a gun to your head while he reamed you. Think it over."

* * *

We were back shooting outside at sunup.

Brand wears the stripes of a Master Sergeant. He bends over a footlocker, takes out a scrapbook, leafs through snapshots of himself and Corporal. Henderson, then drives a jeep along a narrow road on top of a bluff that overlooks the Pacific. A gate surrounded by barbed wire blocks the road. A sign warns: "Target Range. No Admittance." Brand pulls up to the gate. The guard sees his rank, opens the gate, and waves him on.

At the end of the road, Brand gets out of the jeep, takes the heavy chain used for emergency towing, and ties it around the scrapbook. He stares out over the bluff. Waves pound against the side of the cliff. Then, like a discus thrower on his final attempt, he whirls and slings the scrapbook out over the bluff. He gets back in the jeep, starts the engine. The jeep begins to back up, then suddenly races forward. The image of a huge prehistoric bird, it soars off the edge of the cliff, over the ocean.

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Because of the special effects involved, there could only be one take of the last remaining scene to be filmed. Larry wanted to use three cameras, but mud and puddles of water made it impossible to set up more than one.

Wells' double was in the makeup trailer when the assistant director walked in.

"Wells is going to do the scene himself."

The stunt man shrugged. He was on a weekly so it didn't matter to him, but he was surprised. When gunfire and explosives are involved, directors usually insist on using the stunt double. Williams said nothing.

Finally they were ready.

"Take One," the clacker called out.

Williams raised his bullhorn: "From Henderson's last line. Action!"

Henderson, (Wells), gently holds the wounded Pvt. Brand's hand.

"I'll be back. Wait for me. Try not to move."

He runs through the grass towards the nearest house. Bullets strike the ground near him. He crouches and zigzags and is almost there when a bullet catches him at the throat. He drops to the ground, bleeding; more bullets barely miss him. He drags himself and manages to crawl to the rear of the building, out of sight of the sniper on the roof. A crude ladder leans against the wall.

"Zoom in," Williams orders the camera operator.

Henderson pulls himself up the ladder, removes a hand grenade from his belt.

"Zoom back," Williams directs.

There is a deafening explosion; smoke and flying debris obscure the area.

"Cut! Print!"

The assistant director goes over to Wells, who lies on the ground.

"Terrific take!"

He's surprised that Wells isn't getting up:

"The camera's stopped rolling. You can.....Holy Christ!"

* * *

Experts enlarged the images the camera captured, but the long lens exaggerated the distance; smoke and debris made it impossible to get more than an overview of what

was happening. The zooms were so tight only the eyes and expression on Wells' face were in focus, so no one could say when and if what was on film was real or acted. One thing was certain: Wells' vocal box had been severely damaged. The doctors couldn't say for sure how long it would take for his voice to return, or how complete the recovery would be.

There were differing theories about what had occurred. Was there negligence? Had there been poor supervision of a dangerous stunt? Or was it not an accident. The A.D. reported he'd heard Williams threaten to 'kill the son-of-a-bitch.' But Williams was obviously seriously pissed off about having been humiliated on the set, so no one gave much credence to the report. The official verdict was faulty special effects.

* * *

Charles Howard flew in to visit Wells in the hospital. I was in the corridor when he came out of the room. He told me that Wells was doing as well as could be expected. I asked him his take on what had happened.

"How many great writers have described the pain that a guilty conscience can inflict? The line starts with Shakespeare and Dostoyevsky. I believe he planned what happened, to escape from what was tormenting him."

He handed me a letter.

"This came the day before the scene was filmed. You can read it while I pay the gent's room a visit."

I haven't told you the impact your screenplay had on me. When I finished reading it for the first time, I wandered around the property behind our house. It was five years almost to the day since I'd held a fundraiser at the house for the ACLU.

Not everyone who came was sympathetic to the organization. Some had their own agenda. You were giving the pitch for contributions, when Dan Thomas approached me. He pointed at you, and said you should be given a one-way ticket and put on a plane to Moscow. He asked me to have lunch with him at the Beverly Hills Hotel Polo Lounge the following day, to discuss a matter of importance to me.

At the hotel he told me the House un-American Activities Committee was about to call me to testify at their hearings. Waving off my questions, he assured me it could be

avoided. The public needed convincing that motion pictures were being used for communist propaganda. The Committee only wanted one name from me that they didn't already have. Preferably a screen writer.

Mea Culpa.

THE BEARD

A few days after we finished shooting, Larry called me into his office.

"I need to get away for a while before I lock up with the Moviola. I want you to make some arrangements."

He handed me a travel folder for a ranch someplace in Idaho.

"Book the best accommodations they have for two, an executive jet to get there, and a limo to pick me up at the studio."

I knew that his wife was out of town, but by job didn't include asking questions. One of my responsibilities was going over invoices, to be sure we weren't being overcharged. The limo bill turned out to be twice what a run from the studio to Burbank airport should have been. The driver told me he'd been instructed to pick up a second passenger. I recognized the address as the apartment of the recently hired assistant to the unit still photographer. Jane Howard.

The tryst was in its second day when a call came in from Senator Dustin Wallace. Larry had said 'no disturbances,' but I called the Idaho hideaway. I was betting that the

Senator meant more to him than Charles' daughter. Before the day was out, she was back in LA; he was in D.C. meeting with the Senator and his staff.

The primary campaigns were only in their first month, but polls had the Senator running neck and neck with a Southern Governor and a New England Congressman, for his party's nomination. During a cross-country tour, Larry was to create film that would show the candidate as warm and accessible while at the same time a strong, dependable leader.

For weeks he shuttled between wherever the Senator was campaigning, and the editing room at the studio. In Montana, after some ugliness over the Senator's stand on gun control, the Senator requested protection. The Secret Service sent an agent from the general pool for temporary duty: Harold Randolph. Linda said she'd never been to Montana, and joined us. It was always a plus having a pretty woman around for the camera to focus on, and the campaign manager had no trouble getting her to travel with them for a while.

Larry said it was time to test an audience's reaction to the feature. Sneak previews are important because studios use them to decide when a film will be released, where, in how many theaters, and how much money will be spent on prints and advertising. The sneak was set up in Riverside.

Larry asked me to help the PR person put out the preview cards that instruct the audience to rate the movie fair, good, very good, or excellent. I had a bunch of them in my hands when he signaled me to follow him to the restroom.

"The execs are idiots. The one sure way not to get a real reaction is to turn the audience into critics. We have to fight for the integrity of the film. There's nothing to sign, just check the right box."

After the moviegoers filed out of the theater, the PR guy read out the final tally. With the help of our 'excellents,' the preview was graded a success. It was my last duty as associate producer. In a week I was off the payroll.

* * *

The invitation to Sunday brunch came as a big surprise. I told Marilyn it was the first friendly gesture from Larry, ever, and asked her to come with me.

“He wants something from you,” she told me.

Mercedes, their housekeeper, let us in. I knew her from the times I had to pick him up at the house. She told me that Mrs. Williams was at their Villa in Mexico, meeting with a decorator.

Brunch was set up on the patio. Canvas umbrellas covered half a dozen large round tables. Larry and the would-be leader of the free world, were at the center table, flanked by Dan Thomas, and Larry’s current leading lady. The Senator’s wife was in Florida with their two sons, campaigning for her husband. The Secret Service agent hovered close by.

Jane was shooting pictures of the guests like a house photographer at a wedding. Something about her was different; she was pregnant.

Larry spotted me, and signaled that I follow him to his office inside the house.

“Some idiot in publicity put together a trailer I’m supposed to screen for the press next week. I have to meet Linda at our place in Mexico. I need you to follow up on changes I want made.”

He handed me a sheet of paper.

“My notes. We’ll be back Saturday for the Senator’s speech at the Ambassador Hotel. Meet me at the house Sunday morning, early, say eight o’clock. Mercedes may be off. If Linda and I are still sleeping, the key to the back door is in a lock box underneath the sill.”

He jotted some numbers on a slip of paper, and handed me the combination.

“Tear it up when you’re inside.”

Marilyn was talking to Harriet Wilson when I returned. I wasn’t really comfortable with anyone there, and meandered on the beach until she joined me.

“I think I know something you don’t,” she told me.

“I’m all ears.”

“The Senator is shackled up with your boss’ leading lady. Right here at the beach house.”

“It fits. Saturday’s speech ends the primary campaign. If the Senator gets the nomination, this is his last chance for a fling. The slightest whiff of scandal could doom his bid for the White House. He needed a ‘beard.’”

“A beard?”

“Hollywood jargon for someone or something that can provide a veneer of innocence, a kind of foolproof alibi. The brunch is the beard.”

NOT BLUE

It was eerily quiet inside the house; the only sounds came from the breaking waves and steady breathing in the master bedroom. When I got closer it was clear that only one person was sleeping there. I’d seen enough of Larry’s temper to guess that Linda bailed out of the house. I checked my watch, I’d catch hell if I let him oversleep. I knocked on the door until the heavy breathing stopped. I could hear him getting out of bed, putting on a robe, coming to the door and opening it. Only it wasn’t Larry.

Linda was as surprised to see me as I was seeing her.

“Oh, it’s you.”

“Sorry I disturbed you. I’m supposed to meet Larry here at eight.”

“He’ll be in the guest bedroom. I went to sleep early.”

He was lying on the bed, still wearing the suit he had on at the hotel, only the tie was loosened, along with the top buttons of his shirt. I’d seen him like that before--only not blue, not dead.

BETTE DAVIS

Most houses in the Malibu Colony are equipped with a high-tech security system, so the primary duties of the local police are keeping riff raff off the private beaches, and paparazzi at a reasonable distance from their targets. The death of a celebrity is a complication to be dispensed with as quickly and quietly as possible.

The circumstances in the case simplified things: there was no violence, no evidence of a break-in, no suggestion whatsoever that a crime had been committed. An empty bottle of wine and some prescription drugs in the medicine chest was all the police needed. The deceased died from an accidental overdose of alcohol and drugs.

Dan Thomas insisted there be a suitable memorial. Most people assumed it had to do with enhancing the agency's reputation, but insiders attributed other motives.

Held at the beach house, the event was orchestrated like an awards show, complete with filmed testimonials from Larry's current leading lady, and the Senator. Brandon Wells, just recently out of the hospital, sat next to Dan Thomas. A few guests nodded; rumors were rife that the two men were lovers.

Linda was the only one in the room who seemed to actually be in mourning. She asked me to stay after the others left.

"Larry's office is crammed with scripts and papers. Maybe you can help me sort out what should be saved."

I browsed through his files; it was clear this wasn't a simple job. He seemed to have kept everything that had his name on or in it. I suggested she needed someone to make a detailed inventory of what was there. It was probably several days work.

"Larry said you were good at handling details. I'll pay you of course."

The worse thing you can do in this town is reveal that you're not working. I told her I was writing a screenplay that a producer was waiting for, but that I could take a break from it, and would call in few days to set a date. That was fine with her.

As I was leaving I asked her something I was curious about:

"The police say Larry O.D'd on alcohol and drugs. He did like his wine, but he boasted to everyone that he never even took a sleeping pill."

"He liked giving the impression that he was different from everybody else. The truth was, if he had trouble sleeping he took a pill. He also used Amyl Chloride."

"What's that?"

"I assumed you'd know about the current 'in' drug for men trying to spice up their sex life. After what happened to Peter Sellers I tried to get Larry to stop using it."

"I remember reading that Sellers died while having sex."

"Don't misunderstand. We weren't on good terms the last night. I came back from Mexico a few days after he did, and knew he'd been with his leading lady. She always wore a perfume that was made especially for her. He'd sworn never to see her again."

"It's true she was in the house while you were away, but not with your husband. There was a house guest."

I couldn't tell if she didn't care about who that might have been, or knew without asking. She had become difficult for me to read. When I first met her she had a kind of innocence, and reminded me of Dorothy McGuire; now I saw Bette Davis.

A TALE UNFINISHED

Until Death was a flop at the box office; my screenplay was languishing in the ‘to do’ basket. I felt like I was in a hole, digging myself deeper by the day. Should I give up? Try something else? Go back home? I used to be able to put unpleasant thoughts onto an imaginary stage, then draw the curtain down and hide them from view. It didn’t work anymore.

Marilyn’s call asking me to meet her for lunch, was a welcome diversion. She didn’t often take a break from work.

“I’m going to have a series of on the air. They’re calling it *Hatred in America*.”

“You only mentioned you had an idea.”

“That was a long time ago. You didn’t seem interested. Anyway it’s no big deal. Nothing like a feature. They’re only ten-minute profiles.”

“How many?”

“Twelve.”

“I’d call that a pretty big deal.” I couldn’t resist a touch of sarcasm: “Is there anything else I ought to know?”

“They’re going to be shot at a studio in Long Island. They want me to produce them. I have to leave in a few days.”

The lunch ended early. Before she left she told me she thought that a few of the segments could be enlarged into films.

“I’ll have the scripts sent to you. If any of them interest you, you’re welcome to my files.”

* * *

I was restless, and didn’t feel like going back to the apartment. I needed to do something physical. There was a YMCA not too far away.

I'd used their gym before. There were always classes of some sort going on. The one in progress when I arrived was for actors practicing how to audition for a part. I stopped to watch. Casting directors and agents were always invited, but I saw only one industry type in the audience; he walked out while an actor massacred a Tennessee Williams monologue.

The next performer introduced was Alvin, an on and off waiter at the restaurant I used to work in. The 'off' was when he got acting jobs, usually small parts in plays that ran only on weekends. On rare occasions he worked in film. Over time he had developed relationships with a few casting and assistant directors; if the movie they were on was to be shot on location and needed an actor for a bit part, they sometimes called Alvin. He paid his own way to get there.

He spotted me as he walked off, and insisted we have lunch together at a nearby Sushi Bar. The stools at the counter were all taken, but there were seats at a community table. When the waiter came over to take our order, a Japanese man at the table said he'd like another beer. He spoke perfect English, and Alvin saw a captive audience.

"You heard of Toshiro Mifune?"

The man nodded.

"I did a movie with him. Shot it in Europe. He had the best line in the picture.

'What is the sound of one hand crapping?'"

The joke didn't go over big.

"You been in anything I know," a young Latino at the table asked.

"My last movie was with Brandon Wells. It's not out yet," and he embarked on an elaborate fiction about his role in the film.

I'd forgotten that I helped him get a job as an extra on the film. That he could tell his story in front of me was a reminder of the desperate need to appear successful that plagued so many people in Hollywood. I felt embarrassed, not just for Alvin but for myself as well. I made an excuse, paid my check, and left the restaurant.

* * *

The *Hatred in America* stories arrived in a few days. It was a welcome distraction. They were pretty impressive considering they were about real people. One of them did feel

like it could be turned into a feature. It was about the psychology professor Marilyn demonstrated against a while back.

What attracted me was his back-story: to honor a person he idolized, the professor wanted his wife to deliver their first child on April 20th, the same date that person was born. It was earlier than she was due, so he gave her drugs to ensure that she delivered then. She died as a result, shortly after giving birth. The authorities couldn't decide what crime, if any, the professor had committed, and didn't charge him. The man whose birth date he wished to honor, was Adolf Hitler.

A screenplay would have to be written. Maybe it was the shot in the arm I needed. I decided to give it a try as soon as I finished the job cataloguing Larry's papers.

* * *

Linda suggested I start with a collection of French screenplays she put together for him.

"Larry liked owning things that were different, but not the work involved in finding them. I went through dozens of bookstalls in Paris."

She put on a baseball cap.

"I do the pier and back, five days a week."

I watched her for a few minutes as she started jogging. She was a really good looking woman.

They didn't play foreign films where I came from so the titles meant nothing to me: *La Moustache*, *Péril en la Demeure*, *Roman de Gare*, *Caché*, *Arsène Lupin*. One of them caught my attention: it was a movie directed by Luc Besson, a name I'd heard of. The title was *Guérir Chagrin d'amour*, its sub-title: *Muestre insolate; les techniques et méthode avec succès*.

The library had a French-English dictionary. The movie was about how to get away with committing a murder. I opened the bound screenplay; in the front were sketches illustrating the murder sequence. Larry didn't use them, but continuity artists were popular with some directors.

The first drawing showed a woman bending over a man asleep on a bed. Her fingers were pressing down on a particular spot on his neck. "Carotide," was written at

the edge of the frame. On the bedside table was a bottle of pills. The next drawing showed the woman leaving the room, the bottle of pills in her hand.

I didn't hear Linda walk into the room, but I felt a presence and looked up. she was only a few feet away.

"Do you read French?"

"Restaurant French is all."

She nodded.

"I have to change. They're giving me a little pre-birthday party at the gym. You can stay as long as you like."

"Actually I'll be leaving early. A girl I date works for public television. A series of short films she developed starts airing tonight at six. They're all true stories. I'm toying with turning the opening segment into a feature. You might find it interesting."

"I don't usually watch that channel, but I'll tape it."

* * *

I went back to the beach house the following morning.

"Miss William's gone out of town," Mercedes told me. "She said to give you this check before you left."

I was disappointed. I'd looked forward to seeing her again. I finished the job, and wrote a note with my recommendations as to what I thought the Director's Guild might want. Earlier, when I was looking for the French/English dictionary, a paperback squeezed between two volumes of *Historic French Chateaux*, had caught my eye. Before I left the library, I pulled it out. The title was *How Jewish Money Controls the Government*. On the back cover was a head-shot of a man with bulging eyes. I recognized him immediately as the professor in Marilyn's series.

Inside the book was an inscription:

To my daughter

It was a bit of a shocker, but it made the story even more intriguing. I called Marilyn, and told her that I was going to take a crack at turning it into a feature. She was pleased, and told me that by coincidence the research department where she worked, had just picked up an item that might be helpful.

“It’s from the Las Cruces, *New Mexico Daily Telegraph*, dated April 21st. I’ll read it to you. ‘Last night a professor at nearby New Mexico State College, was found dead in his apartment, apparently of sudden cardiac arrest. An untouched birthday cake with ‘Happy Birthday Adolf’ written on it, was in the room. The authorities haven’t turned up a friend or student of the professor with that name.’”

I had a strong suspicion that when Linda suddenly left town, it was to pay a visit to her father. Seeing the film, she learned for the first time how her mother died.

The artist’s illustration for the Luc Bresson film, flashed before my eyes, only it was Linda pressing down on her father’s neck. The thought hit me then that Larry could have suffered the same fate; the motive certainly was there, he cheated on her shamelessly. Right or wrong, it could be the ending for my screenplay. Maybe I was just looking for an excuse to see her again, but I felt I should let Linda know that I was planning to make my murderer the character modeled after her.

I called the beach house to arrange a meeting, but there was no answer. Larry had given me the number for the Villa in Puerto Vallarta. A man answered the phone. I gave him my name and said Mrs. Williams would know me. He told me to hold on. The voice sounded familiar. When she picked it up, Linda sounded out of breath. I told her I needed to talk to her, that I would come down whenever it suited her, the sooner the better.

“That won’t be possible for a while,” she told me. “My husband is here with me. We were married in Las Vegas, on my birthday. Actually you know him, Harold Randolph, the secret service agent. We grew close during the campaign.”

“It’s a relief to learn that you got married on your birthday.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I thought after you saw my friend’s film...”

“I forgot to tape that show. Did I miss something?”

I told her she hadn’t, congratulated her, and wished her good luck.

* * *

It took me longer than I thought it would to finish my script. Whodunits have to be carefully worked out; if there’s a hole in the plot, the reader will spot it right away. I was finally wrapping it up, when Linda called. I hadn’t expected to hear from her again.

“There’s been a change,” she told me. “My husband had to leave for a new assignment. Come down whenever you’re free. Do you like boating?”

I told her I did, that my family kept a small motorboat at a lake near where we lived.

“Then bring a bathing suit. The Villa is on a private lagoon that opens onto the Gulf. It has its own dock and a speedboat. Larry loved things that were fast.”

I booked a non-stop that left for Puerto Vallarta the next morning, and started to put together what I’d need for the trip. My bathing suit was in the bottom drawer of the dresser. I hadn’t used it in a while, and forgot that underneath it was the gun I was given when I worked at the pawnshop, and had to pick up money and jewelry from other branches. The initials C.C. were carved into the handle. I used to make up names for the original owner. Charlie Chaplin was my favorite.

The gun had special meaning to me, the way Marilyn said Jewish boys felt about Bar-Mitzvah gifts that marked their reaching manhood. It felt good when I held it in my hand. The newspapers had recently run a story about bandits in Mexico. I thought “why not take it,” and put the gun in my carryall.

I really didn’t know what would happen when I got to the Villa, or how long I’d stay. Before I went to bed I left a message on my answering machine saying I would be in Mexico for a few days.

A NEW VOICE

My name is Marilyn Kline. I am the Marilyn in the story you are reading. Written by Phillip Singer, the narrator of the story, it is based on people in the movie industry that he knew. He didn't finish it, but I can tell you what happened after he left off writing it.

I was scheduled to attend a seminar in LA, and called Phillip to arrange for us to get together while I was in town. The message on his answering machine said he would be in Mexico for a few days. It had been recorded two weeks earlier. Phillip was always on time; a few days didn't usually mean fourteen. When the seminar ended I called again; the message hadn't changed. I thought his phone might be down, and went to the apartment.

Phillip was brought up in a small town in New Jersey, where people didn't bother locking their doors. I wasn't surprised that I could walk right in. It had been a while since I'd been in the apartment, but everything seemed pretty much the same, except the living room seemed larger than I remembered. Apartments in New York will do that to you. There were several copies of his screenplay on his desk. A note pad beside them had 'Linda, Puerto Vallarta' written on it. I never met Linda, but from the way Phillip talked about her, I guessed he had a crush on her.

It was probably the amount of time I spent developing the *Hatred in America* series that made me think of the gun Phillip kept in the apartment. I opened the dresser drawer where he'd shown me he kept it; the gun was gone. He often talked about wanting someday to really explore a foreign country, not just whiz through it as a tourist. If he decided to extend his stay in Mexico, it wouldn't have been a bad idea to take the gun, considering what was going on there. I left a note asking him to call me when he got back. He'd told me he'd be sending me one, so I picked up a copy of the screenplay.

Four weeks passed with no word. I called the American Consul in Puerta Vallarta, and told him the office was trying to reach a male American who visited there

about a month ago, and hadn't been heard from. I asked if anything unusual happened around then. He thought a moment:

"A few weeks ago, a fisherman told police he saw a speedboat head from shore to the stone archway that's featured on local postcards. Everyone knows to keep a safe distance away from the area, but the boat went right into the treacherous rocks and currents, and was destroyed. No body was found. Police figured a drug runner, unfamiliar with the area, was the victim."

Phillips's screenplay opened up the possibility that the missing body could have been him. Linda had to assume that he figured out she'd gone to Los Cruces to see her father, and why. And thanks to the continuity sketches he accidentally saw, he also knew how. But there were two flaws in my theory: she was in Las Vegas on her birthday getting married, and said she hadn't seen my film about her father.

* * *

The office subscribed to the Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Magazine. I was skimming the last issue, when a photograph caught my eye.



This is the article it appeared in:

"Lynx and Lamb Gaede were twin pop performers who were promoted as the young faces of White Nationalism. Their songs dealt with overt White Nationalist themes,

and even the band they sang in, Prussian Blue, was a reference to the distinctive color of Zyklon B residue in the Nazi gas chambers. A photo from their childhood shows the girls posed in white T-shirts with a smiley face adorned with Hitler's toothbrush mustache and neatly parted, jet-black hair.

At fifteen, Lamb was diagnosed with a rare blood disorder, and died. Lynx changed her name to Linda, and says that she abandoned the racism imbued in her by her father. A psychology professor, he kept the girls out of public schools, and taught them himself, using pre-civil rights textbooks heavy on Holocaust denial, and racial pseudo-science. Linda says she has settled instead into 'a place of love and light,' and added "I'm glad I was in the band, but I think we should have been pushed toward something easier for us to handle than being front men for a belief system we didn't really understand. I'm not a white nationalist anymore."

Linda had told Phillip that she sang in a band when she was younger. I'd seen a picture of her recently in the entertainment section of the *L.A. Times*; they were one and the same person. *The Times* article was about donating her late husband's papers to the Director's Guild of America. Her agent, Dan Thomas, was quoted in it as saying he saw a big future for the widow.

A while later I heard her on a right-wing radio talk show. She spouted wildly irrational views about pre-marital sex, and pornography, and ended with "I cry out to God to use me to touch those who threaten America's values." It brought to mind her words in the *Intelligence Magazine* article: "A place of love and light." They were right out of some quack religious songbook.

Guest spots on TV talk shows followed. She had a unique ability to reduce gross distortions to talk show anecdotes, and was catnip for a media consumed with ratings. One TV host labeled her 'America's right wing babe.'

Around that time she moved to Manhattan, and was beginning to sound like someone planning to run for office. I found it odd that her new husband was never seen with her or mentioned. The office did some inquiring. It turned out that Linda was not in Las Vegas on her birthday. She had never remarried.

On a Sunday daytime news show, she announced that she would be joining a rally outside Shea Stadium, Friday, July 13, to protest the New York Met's having invited black Rock star Jimi Hendrix to sing the traditional song during the seventh inning stretch.

I thought about attending the game just to see how she came across in person, but it was a long subway ride to Queens, and Friday turned out to be a brutally hot day in the middle of a three-day heat wave. It would be easier to watch it on television.

In the bottom of the fifth inning the Mets were losing to the Chicago Cubs, two to one. Suddenly the stadium went dark. Lightning bolts had knocked out two major generator facilities that provided power to the city. The blackout that ensued turned out to be the most massive in New York's history. Airports and tunnels were closed; hundreds of office buildings, stores, and hotels were shut down. In the midst of a severe financial crisis, and already on edge over the unsolved Son-of-Sam murders, thousands of New Yorkers went out of control, looting, overturning buses and cars.

When power was restored the next day, the media reported that sixteen-hundred stores were damaged, over five-hundred fires had been set; forty-five hundred people were arrested. Miraculously there was only one fatality. Several eyewitnesses interviewed by the police said they observed a group of youngsters running out of a convenience store near the stadium. They were carrying packages of food, cartons of cigarettes, and bottles of beer. An irate woman ran after them.

The woman demanded that the boys stop and return what they had stolen. When they didn't, she pulled a gun out of her purse, and fired at them. One boy fell to the ground, another wrested control of the gun away from her. He shot her in the face, dropped the gun, and fled. The woman died on the way to the hospital. There was not enough light for anyone to identify the assailant. The only clue the police had was the gun. The initials 'C.C' were burned into the handle.

The following day I got a phone call from Phillip. He was in Geneva, Switzerland, and wanted to know if I could add anything to the news reports of Linda's death. It was an enormous relief to know that he was alive and well, but I wasn't prepared for the news that he was staying with Linda's sister. I told him I read she died years ago. He said that Lamb's doctors in Geneva had cured her, and she remained there. The hate group the

twins and their father belonged to, put out the story that she had died, to cover up her having renounced them.

I asked Phillip to bring me up to date on what had happened since I last heard from him. This is what he told me:

“I went to Puerto Vallarta to talk to Linda about the ending I planned to write for my screenplay. She was showing me the room I’d be staying in, when the phone rang. She excused herself and took the call in another room. I knew just by looking at her when she came back, that she’d gotten exciting news. The call was from Dan Thomas. He had arranged for her to speak at a gathering of major donors to California’s Republican Party. It would be an ideal time to announce a run for Congress.

“It was important that no surprises turned up before her appearance. For the first time, I learned that Linda had a twin sister who lived in Geneva. The press was sure to learn about the twin. Because the sisters didn’t get along, it was essential to know what she would tell them.

“Dan had a proposal. I should call and say that I was making a documentary about media celebrities, and wanted to interview her about her sister. He said she would trust me, it was a talent I had, and that I could influence the way she would respond to the press. It was flattering to hear that from Dan Thomas, I hadn’t thought I’d made much of an impression on him. Linda had told him about my screenplay. He wants me to send it to him the minute it’s finished.

“Lamb was perfectly willing to talk to me. I was booked on a flight to Geneva, First Class. Linda drove me to the airport. When she dropped me off, she told me that I might like her sister. She was right about that.

“Geneva is a relaxed and laid-back city, nothing like LA or New York. I finished the script and sent it to Dan Thomas. I’ll hang out here until I hear from him. Won’t take him long to set up a deal to make it into a film.”

MIRROR, MIRROR

Dan Thomas never called.

There was no future for me in Switzerland, so I booked a flight back to L.A. There was a change of planes at JFK, so I rented a car, and went home for a few days. I have to admit I enjoyed the fuss everyone made over me being a producer. Before I left, my parents asked me if I needed anything. I told them there was a saying in Hollywood that you were only as good as your last film; it would help me get a new project going if I had an office. They staked me to six months rent.

I had just begun to look for a place, when a local TV station broadcast an interview with Brandon Wells. It was his first public appearance since the accident. The once rich baritone voice was reduced to a barely intelligible whisper, but he gave an impressive performance recounting his near death experience on the film. He came across as a heroic figure, joking lightly that he wouldn't be able to ride in the rodeo any longer because the blood thinner medication he now had to take could bleed him out if he got thrown and struck his head.

The response to the interview encouraged the studio to book the film into a few theaters. *Until Death* went on to become a hit. What followed was even more surprising: the screenplay was nominated for an Academy Award. Faced with the prospect that a name randomly selected from the telephone directory might be called up to accept an Oscar, the studio decided to credit the real author.

Soon after the nominations were announced, Wells invited me to have lunch with him at his home. Wells' wife had divorced him; the house was depressingly empty. A housekeeper led me to the study. The actor sat in a large easy chair, and motioned me to take the one opposite him.

"My Scientology counselor sits there for our weekly session."

He must have thought that would impress me. When I didn't respond he got right to why I was invited.

"I'm writing a memoir about the making of *Until Life*. The blacklist will be a big part of it. There's a good chance Charles Howard will win the Oscar, so things have to be accurate and detailed. For some reason his daughter won't return my phone calls. You know her. I want you to explain that I've always been a fan of her father, that I gave him the job to write the screenplay. At great personal risk to me, you might add. A while back I wrote a personal letter to Howard. I need to know if his daughter has the letter, and if she's read it."

"She's a very private person."

"She'll tell you. Find out."

"I read the letter."

He wasn't prepared for that. His body stiffened. He glared at me, got up, and walked out of the room.

I let myself out of the house. When I got back to my apartment I called Jane. The last time I spoke to her was at the memorial service for her father. Her mother had died only a few months earlier. I told her about my conversation with Wells.

"I hate that man," she said.

She took a moment to compose herself.

“You never met my mother. She was beautiful, could have been an actress. She and pop had a real love affair. A drunk driver ran her down as she was coming out of a drug store. It was only a few blocks from the house. They said father had a heart attack, but he died of a broken heart. One day, just before shooting began, Wells came to the house unannounced. He wanted a new scene written to build up his part. Dad was at his weekly poker game; I was on a job interview. The star thought he was irresistible, and made a pass at mom. Pop got really angry when she told him.”

“He had lots of reasons to dislike the man. Do you have the letter Wells is looking for?”

“I never saw one from him. That doesn’t mean there wasn’t one. Dad kept files on everything that happened then, but when we moved back from Mexico some of his papers were missing. He never believed it was an accident. What’s in the letter that’s so important?”

“It was a half-assed apology. Brandon Wells gave your father’s name to the Committee.”

The book, entitled “How I Broke the Blacklist,” came out just after Charles Howard won the Academy Award. I tried reading it, but the lies and distortions were so unbelievable I threw it away in disgust. Wells mounted an aggressive PR campaign to sell the book. One of the results was the Freedom of Expression Award. The presentation would follow a screening of *Until Death* at the Motion Picture Academy. A Question and Answer session with Wells would round out the event. Tickets for the event cost twenty-five bucks. It hurt me to pay to see a movie I helped produce.

I came early. I wanted a seat close to the stage to be sure I’d be recognized when I raised my hand to question the star.

The movie ended to enthusiastic applause; the house lights went up, the audience grew hushed. When Wells didn’t appear, people began stirring in their seats. Finally an Academy official entered from the wings. He waited until an instinct that audiences seem to possess, made them attentive again.

“There has been an accident. Brandon Wells is being taken to a hospital.”

Questions of alarm filled the auditorium. The official raised his hand:

“I can tell you what I know. The theater has a reception area backstage, where guests can rest and tidy up before being introduced. When the film ended I went there to tell Brandon it was time to proceed to the stage. He was standing in front of a mirror, his back to me. His hands were raised over his head like a fighter who’d just scored a knockout. I called into the room: ‘Time!’ He seemed startled, turned suddenly, and fell. His head struck the corner of the dressing table. There was a lot of blood.”