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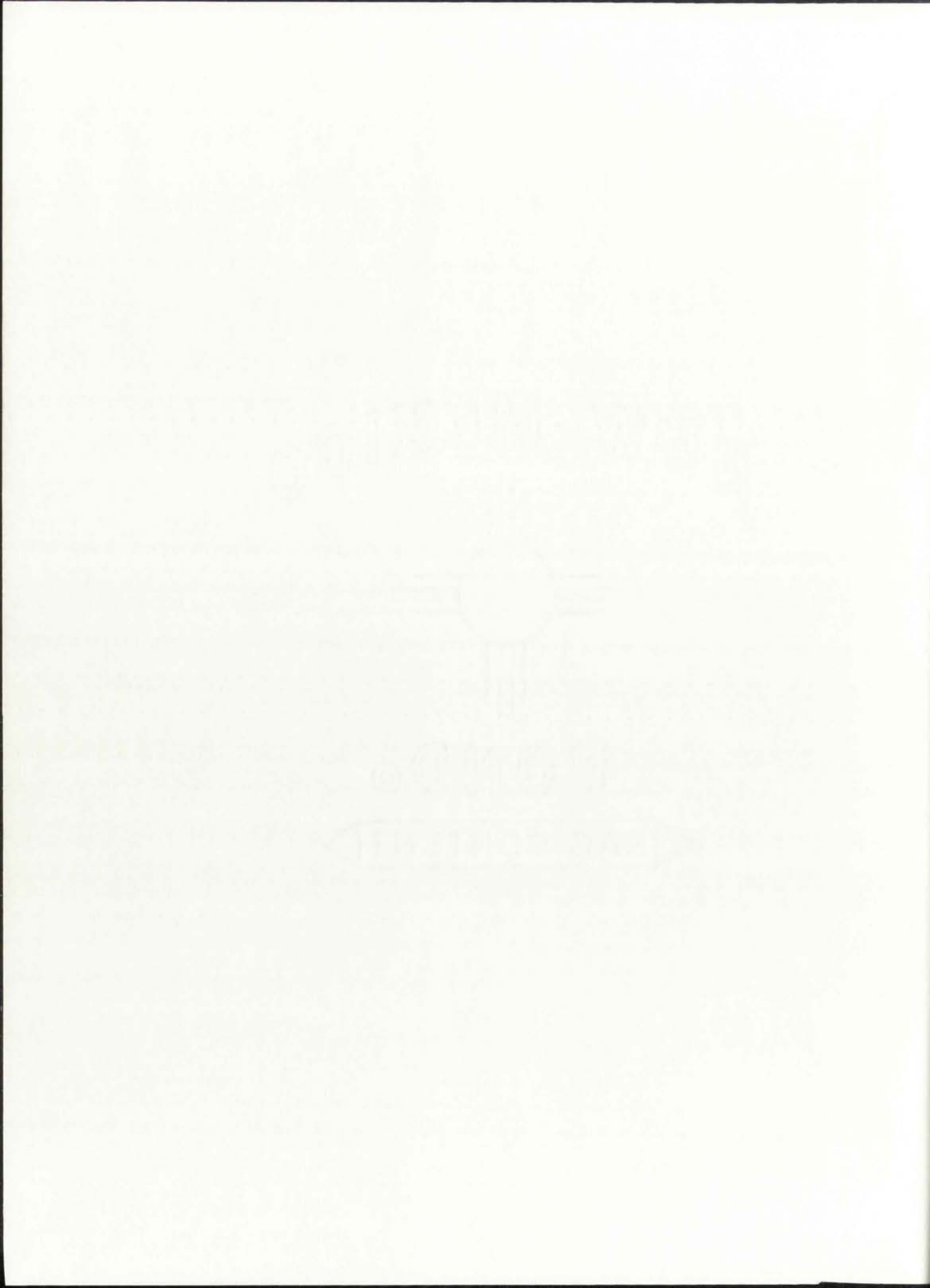
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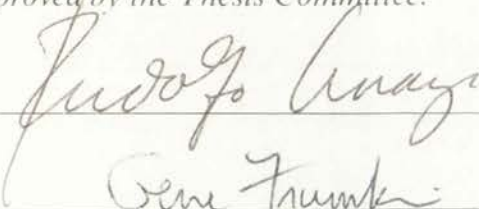
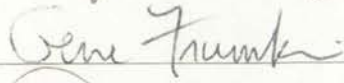
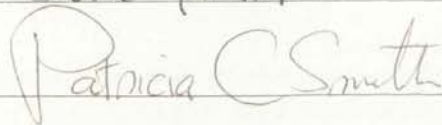
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Cynthia Wynne Wooley
Candidate


English
Department

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ROUGH ON A TANGENT

BY

CYNTHIA WYNNE WOOLEY

B.A., Antioch University, Los Angeles, 1987

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in English

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

December, 1990

HOUSE OF COMMONS

BY

THE SECRETARY OF STATE

ABSTRACT OF THE

REPORT OF THE COMMISSIONERS OF THE
LAND OFFICE FOR THE YEAR 1880

PRESENTED TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE

IN ANSWER TO A RESOLUTION

PASSED IN 1879

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Rough on a Tangent

Cynthia Wooley

B.A. Liberal Studies, Antioch Univ., Los Angeles, 1987

M.A. English, Univ. of New Mexico, 1990

Rough on a Tangent is a novel which charts the progress of Rita, a novice detective in Los Angeles, as she follows her first real investigation to Madrid and back. The case concerns her housemate, Kurt, who gets involved with a spiritual cult which is using a new form of biochemical warfare to gain power. I have used the detective story genre to explore Rita's journey of self discovery. These first four chapters comprise part one of my novel.

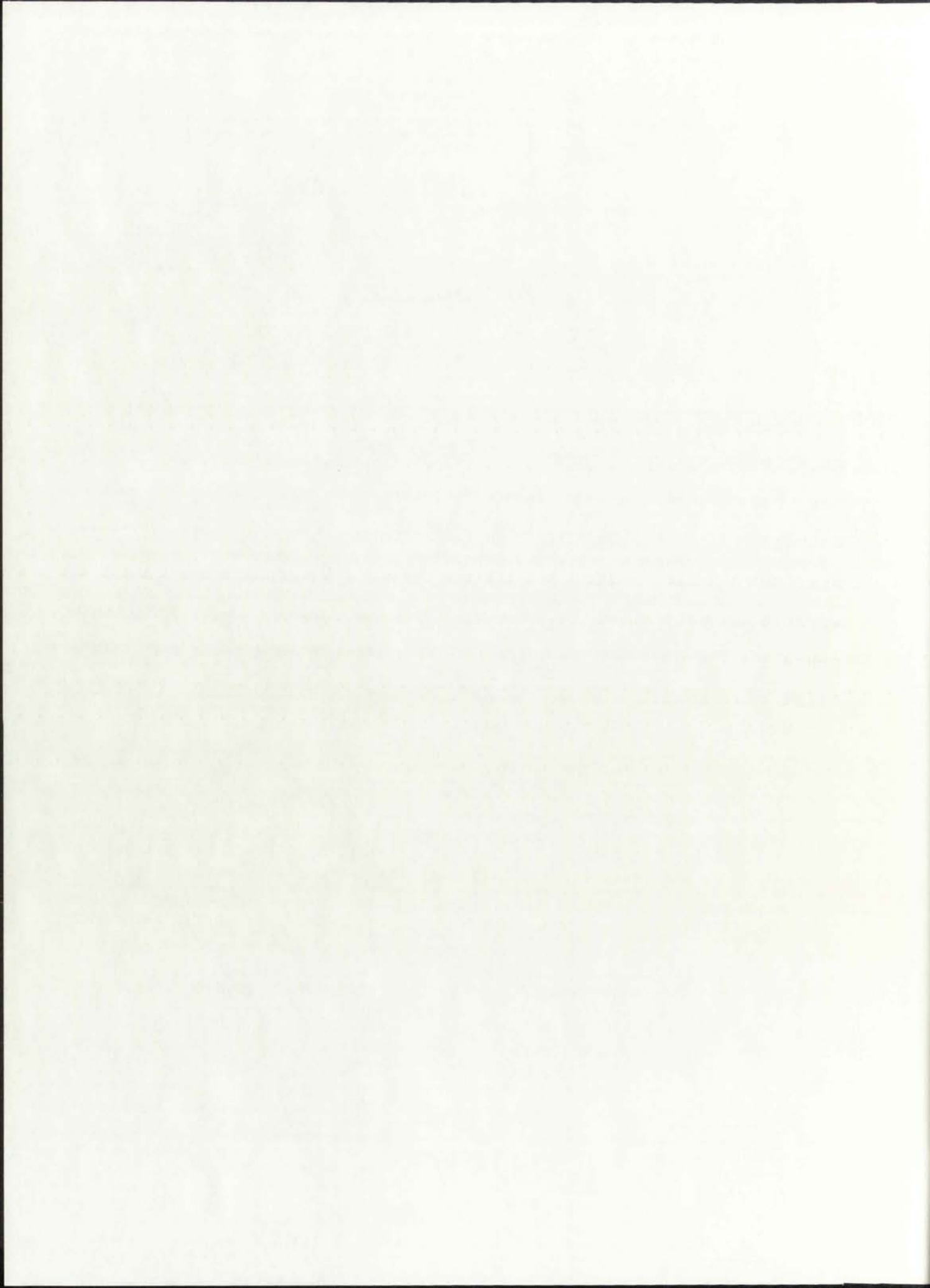


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Rough on a Tangent

Preface

I have been working on this novel, Rough on a Tangent, on and off for five years. I began to think of the novel when I was living in Mexico in 1985. I was getting ready to return to the United States for a few months before continuing on to Spain. I thought that my first novel would be about my years in Mexico, but what evolved was the story of Rita, a female detective in Los Angeles.

The only previous experience I had with detective fiction had taken place ten years earlier. I was laid up for six weeks with hepatitis in Oaxaca. Since I had to remain in bed resting, I read Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment during the day and Agatha Christie novels at night. She didn't touch me as deeply as Dostoevsky did, but she kept me company during my insomniac nights with her tales of quirky old English ladies and gents investigating improbable murders.

I chose to write within the genre of the detective novel because it gave me the possibility of discovering realities of life while my characters were investigating death. In my novel the heroine follows a series of clues which finally reveal the mystery as well as the heroine's view of the world. This process is a particularly enjoyable one for me. I wanted the events propelled along by a sense of intrigue and tension, but I also wanted the main character's

self-discovery to be as essential as the crime she was solving.

My heroine/protagonist is Rita, a native Angeleno and a novice detective. The novel opens when Rita discovers that her housemate, Kurt, a former detective, has been investigating a series of murders. Shortly thereafter he is kidnapped. Rita's investigation takes her into an apprenticeship with Dr. Delhi, a former writer of detective fiction and a psychic. She also relies upon the help of Zelda, the office computer who has human qualities. The murders Kurt is investigating are apparently carried out by members of a spiritual cult which is trying out a new form of biochemical warfare on civilians in order to gain power. Rita searches frantically for Kurt, and on the second day he reappears, explaining his disappearance as an initiation ceremony into the cult. Rita suspects Kurt's strange behavior may have something to do with the murders. She then pursues Kurt as he follows the cult to Madrid. At the novel's end, she returns to L.A. to confront both Dr. Delhi and her boss who has had a hand in the cult's activities.

My main gurus in this literary endeavor have been Rudy Anaya, Joseph Campbell and, of course, Raymond Chandler. Rita's wanderings are very much in line with the hero's journey as described by Joseph Campbell. Campbell calls the story of the quest the basis for most mythology and much fiction. Rita starts out as a young but jaded urbanite. She is at the same time very innocent of the workings of the

world outside Hollywood. I waited until I had written several chapters of my first draft before I let myself read any Chandler novels. Rita comes to her vision of the world in much the same way that Raymond Chandler's main character, Philip Marlowe, does. It is a vision which sees L.A. as the final step for the pioneers and perpetuators of the American dream. "It is not a fragrant world," but it is the world she lives in. At the beginning of the novel, Rita is someone who has acquired, from her I-Love-Lucyish parents, a romantic acquiescence about her home town. At the same time she has grown cynical about the corruption taking place in Los Angeles. The novel is a Bildungsroman in that she must come to terms with the evil in her world and what she can do about it.

I realized early on that in tackling both the fanatacism of spiritual cults and the business of biochemical warfare, the book could get a bit heavy handed, so I use humor to balance the more serious themes. I also relied on the advice of Eudora Welty in her book The Eye of the Story. In her chapter entitled "Must the Novelist Crusade?" she states:

It can be said at once, I should think, that we are all agreed upon the most important point: that morality as shown through human relationships is the whole heart of fiction, and the serious writer has never lived who dealt with anything else. And yet, the zeal to reform, which quite properly inspires the editorial, has never done fiction much good. (Welty 148).

She goes on to say that the novel is given to confusion and contradiction and that it does not argue as well as it discloses "things about life that are deeper and more lasting and less destructive to understanding than approval or disapproval." (Welty 150).

Eudora Welty writes about a writer's "working vision" and "home truth." This is something I learned a lot about during my two years at UNM working with Rudy Anaya. His generosity as a writer, teacher and friend has been an invaluable gift to me. Rudy was one of the main reasons I wanted to come to UNM. He helped me to whittle away at my tendency to lecture and to not back away from the story's big moments. At the same time, he challenged me to explore the cultural paradoxes of whatever I was writing about.

There is another element of my novel I'd like to mention. As Faulkner wrote, the past is never past. As Marquez and the other magic realists who influence my work write, the ancestors are never really gone but hover around us. And as American pop culture and science fiction say, the future is never far away. The elements of futurism in my story are not the future in the sense that Star Wars or Star Trek are visions of science fiction. It is not every aspect of human life that has been altered by technology. What I try to do is create a relationship between humans and the machines with which they spend so much of their lives - especially the car and the computer. Another recurring theme is how the heroine finds non-violent ways to deal with the violence she encounters.

This novel has served me well as a way of working with my vision of the world. I hope some of its readers also enjoy the ride.

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Mr. [Name], [Title], [Agency]

Mr. [Name], [Title], [Agency]

Mr. [Name], [Title], [Agency]

Mr. [Name], [Title], [Agency]

Mr. [Name], [Title], [Agency]

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Mr. [Name], [Title], [Agency]

Mr. [Name], [Title], [Agency]

Mr. [Name], [Title], [Agency]

Mr. [Name], [Title], [Agency]

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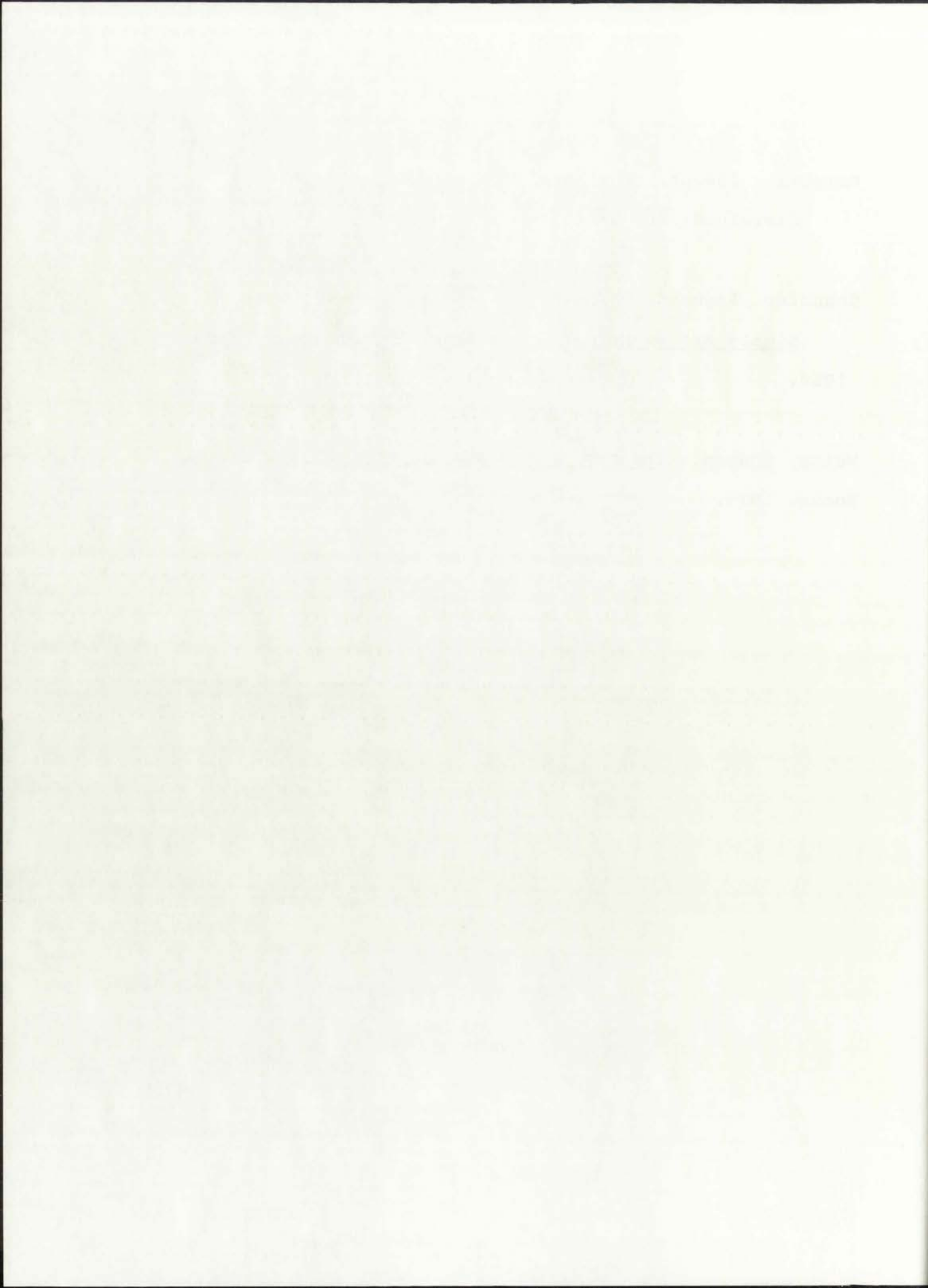
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Chapter One

My convertible was the only thing moving on the street, so slowly that the jacaranda blossoms fell onto the red upholstery. I had the jazz station on, not my favorite, but it kept my car in good working order. Lousy was the day when the world discovered that no machine was totally inanimate, that every one had its tic. My car Bessie's tic was jazz, the slow hot kind that made L.A. feel sultrier than ever.

Driving to work in the morning was always a poignant time for me, but especially at jacaranda time. It was the only time I truly loved in my home town of Los Angeles. As for my daily feelings of distress upon driving to work, it was like driving myself to jail every morning.

I was working as a detective, a quaintly historical occupation in a town of self-sufficient sharks. I guess everyone but me knew that private eyes had gone out of style with locked diaries and community morals. At any rate, if my clients couldn't make sense out of their pasts and futures, how was I supposed to?

My black dress already felt like a suit of armor with the sun burning my lap through the open roof. If only I'd known I was going to be out on the streets. Well, it was a minor irritation. I didn't have many problems, being a believer in the frictionless environment. My boss, bad as he was, was not a tyrant, nor was my housemate, Kurt. Kurt and I had a platonic and supportive relationship. My motto was "neither

too close or you'll get burnt nor too far away or you'll freeze," as an expert cook down in Mexico once advised me. That was all to change, real fast.

I was driving down Sixth Street through the jacaranda-graced residential zone that connects my neighborhood near downtown with Hollywood. It was the only glimpse of nature before I hit West Hollywood. The jacarandas blossoming in early summer was the closest this irrigated oasis came to having a season. Sure, we had rain once or twice a year, and there were the Santa Ana winds, ushering in earthquake weather like a Mexican revolution, but that was unpredictable. Yet every May the jacaranda trees left their flowers scattered across town like a purpled Pacific coast version of an autumn back east. It was the only time I could tell by my surroundings what season I was in.

I must admit I had fallen for the Raymond Chandler image of what a detective was. This is why I had answered an ad for being a "correspondent" at the Ralph Ranson Detective Agency about a year ago, besides the fact that my housemate Kurt still worked there then, and pretty much got me the job. It beat delivering singing telegrams in ridiculous costumes, my last gig. Still, I felt disillusioned with what I thought might be an adventurous and romantic job. I realized now that what was probably so great and noble about Philip Marlowe's agency was that he was the only person there. He could spend all day in an existentialist trance when he

wasn't out stalking crime. He could go out for a gimlet cocktail whenever he wanted to.

I turned into the parking lot, found an empty space, and turned the motor off. The Ralph Ranson Detective Agency was in a nondescript building on Wilshire Boulevard wedged between two other nondescript buildings. I rode the elevator up to the 13th floor, an indication of bad omen I should have heeded when I went for my first interview. Every time I pushed the 13 button it seemed like my last act of free will until I left the office at five.

Ralph gave me his sinewy stare as I came around the revolving door, which seemed strange since I wasn't any later than usual. I took another whirl around the door, scanning the room I was about to enter and my brain for a "why this time?" Then I saw the latest bland blonde gracing my spot on the charts. Once again my desk had been given to my boss's new love interest, who apparently needed looking after, as they usually did. They were almost always out of work actors, and they left our office as soon as they were offered even the smallest part in a mob scene. At least that's what I thought happened to them. It was a syndrome that rarely took more than three days. I enjoyed these breaks from my desk thoroughly, since that was the only time Ralph would let me do the street work.

My boss Ralph was lean and dramatic, and tended to go for these types of guys as if his personal life was just an extension of the precarious nature of the biz itself. Of

course, the trick was to maintain our client's interest in the people they wanted us to track down. This was my job.

Our clients were mostly abandoned parents and spouses in the Midwest, and I kept them going with my descriptions of following their loved ones in unemployment lines and even gazing sadly at greyhound busses heading back to Des Moines. Sometimes I suspected that the descriptions I was given had been made up by Ralph's P.I.s on the street. I assuaged my conscience with the thought that at least I might be consoling someone waiting for some good news.

Correspondence kept Ralph's costs down somewhat, in terms of his long distance phone bills. He had a thirties payroll scale coupled with a strong consumeristic drive. It used to bother me that my desk was the one always given to these useless guys, but now I simply saw it as a way out of the office for the day. I made my entrance, throwing a quick wink to Ralph, who was obviously bent on avoiding any explanation. Last week I had dared to write him a memo asking him when my salary would go up in accordance with my position on the days when I did the street work. He had written a memo back which stated that I had been in training with Kurt before and my apprenticeship wasn't over yet. I sauntered straight over to Zelda, the office computer, wondering what my reward for this latest sacrifice could be. Maybe I should consider a furlough in Brazil. I crossed Zelda's legs, switching her to the "ON" position. With a peripheral glance I saw that my desk's new inhabitant already

had a nameplate. JEFFREY JONES. Jesus swept. Jeffrey was a WASP who probably couldn't read the trademark on his own surfboard, let alone compose the kind of poetry required to keep our clients on the line. I mentally cancelled the bungalow in Bahia. What I had better do was look for another job. Zelda had begun to stick her tongue out at me since the seconds allotted for putting in my command had elapsed. She'd have said much worse, but our computers couldn't speak until spoken to. Ralph had played some cruel tricks on our office, but nothing had gone beyond the day he bought this black computrix with a built in attitude. Give it one more go, I told myself. 9:15 and I was already exhausted. Well, no matter. I'd get enough descriptions from the latest mail to spend all day trying to match them to the streetwalkers in deepest Hollywood.

"The Midwest, you misdelivered bomb," I hissed.

"You're gonna hafta get more specific than that, girl, and don't come to ME to print out your change of address cards when your house goes up in flames, Rita," Zelda hissed.

I was simply not going to get involved with Zelda this morning, who had been worse than ever since the receptionist had given her a whole bunch of rap music tapes for her birthday. When we first got her she was merely saucy. Now most of the time she referred to me as "Honky," and reprints of old Black (and Grey) Panther leaflets frequently appeared in the printouts I requested. At first I thought it was a virus but now I knew it was her vengeance. Lord knows little

had changed for any of us since the sixties, and Zelda at least had some accuracy given that she was only an office machine, but I had had it with being her personal vehicle for revenge.

"Okay, Zelda, make it Kansas, then, but I won't be around to bother with your ruby slippers when my house flattens your machinery, oreo."

Zelda and I threw insults like this back and forth as if we were both programmed for it. Maybe we were. Mine was just cultural and hers was something Ralph had developed to keep us on our toes. For me however, it had a demoralizing effect. I went over to the printer so that I wouldn't have to do any more mental fencing with Zelda. Once I had enough letters printed out, I quickly left the office.

Doing street surveillance alone had its novelty for me. Until today I'd always gone along with Kurt, back when he still worked for the agency. Kurt knew how impossible it could be to actually track down someone. It was not always sordid but it was invariably sad work. The photos sent to us were usually ripped from their hopeful moments in high school yearbooks and looked nothing like the jaded sorts we saw along Hollywood Boulevard. When Kurt was there, we'd take the comic perspective I found it hard to do on my own. When I was alone, everyone in Hollywood looked like their closest relative was in Omaha. Apparently they had no family, dysfunctional or not, to take the edge off the loneliness I saw in their eyes.

Still, field work meant freedom from the subtle oppression of the workplace. In the office I usually finished with the correspondence by early afternoon and then I could spend hours feigning more paperwork while secretly scribbling song lyrics. In fact I'd sent a bunch of songs to a salsa group in Japan last week. They called themselves Tropizen and had put out a call for progressive stuff. Those Japanese were quick. I might be living on royalties and out of Ralph Ranson's in no time flat. The major crisis of my adult life so far had been my inability to find a way to make money and keep my ethics intact at the same time.

The sky was turning white early, a sure sign of summer's onslaught. I hung a right onto Santa Monica Boulevard. In my peevishness at my lack of position in life (epitomized by my adolescently manned desk back at the office) I looked to the radio dial for comfort. When I felt particularly fragmented I'd put it on scan and listen to each station for five seconds. I thought of making a tape for Zelda and wondered what kind of atmosphere I could create for our office by next Monday. Maybe some gospel or some new age Muzak would mellow her out.

Amazed at my own sense of cruelty, I shifted my gaze to take in a typical bus stop sight. A guy in black wraparound sunglasses making obscene gestures my way. Another misogynist, I surmised, dismissing him. Then I noticed he was wearing Mexican handwoven pants and shirt, pyjamas to the undiscerning eye. This made his body luminously white, in

direct contrast to the urban grime around him. There were tawdry porno shops and storefronts even neon couldn't enliven. Here and there bag wraiths pushed shopping carts brimming with junk, the eerie flip side to so much consumerism. After all, this was the city that had originated the bumper sticker that proclaimed: "When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping." The bag wraiths were so monochlor gray from being out in the muck that it was no longer possible to guess their ethnic origins. The guy at the bus stop got up and walked towards my car, smiling broadly. I pulled over, he got in.

"What's it going to be this time, babe: chains, whips or the raspberries?"

"Oh fine, that's the first time you've offered to go to the market in weeks, Kurt. What are you doing here?"

"Getting a little culture. What about you?" Kurt slid his English accent a little further into Cockney.

Kurt and I had met at the University of the Americas in Mexico City where we were both majoring in Spanish five years before. We had moved to a small town in southern Mexico to get our provincial accents down and had moved to Los Angeles two years ago. Sometimes I thought we were too comfortable in our living situation and used each other as a way not to go out and meet people we could fall in love with. A sense of profound relatedness and a slightly perverse decorum in dialogue reigned between us. I had never had any brothers, but Kurt seemed like more than a brother. He slid his arm around my shoulders.

"Did Lord Leopardskin let you out of your cage or did you finally quit?"

"Actually you're witnessing my first promotion in two years. Now be a good boy and read me that first letter in the folder on the back seat."

I knew I was depressed when I couldn't even give Kurt the lowdown. It was humiliating to be upseated by one of Ralph's playthings again. But Kurt was in a teasing mood, and serving as his private pencil sharpener wasn't my idea of bliss that morning. If he had been a bit less flip, I might have told him the truth. I adopted the cranky maternal approach and Kurt played along, though he rarely gave in.

"What the hell, haven't done this in awhile," he said, reaching over for the folder on the back seat.

Back at the office we had a system whereby Frankie, who if he'd been one inch shorter would have been a dwarf, would read the letters to Zelda. She'd put them on disk according to location, and we'd work from the printouts and photos. Together they looked like an odd ventriloquist act, for often Frankie would perch on Zelda's lap and read into her ear so as not to disturb the daydreaming of the rest of the office. I always wondered if something was going on at Ralph's agency besides the usual petty power plays in which I was either a lowly participant or a cool observer.

As Kurt expertly tore the printouts apart, his fingernails long from playing flamenco guitar, he told me the dates went as far back as six months.

and a good reputation and was one of the best of the

theater people.

He was a very successful man in the theater and was

one of the best of the theater people.

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one of the best of the theater people.

"Better take the latest ones, the others are probably dead, remarried, or no longer of economic or even cultural interest."

We were now trolling along the sex-parlor storefronts further east toward Western. The women in the doorways beckoned to Kurt.

"What do they think I am, your mother?"

Kurt just grinned and picked a letter, three-weeks-old, from Wichita. He read it to me over the traffic:

"To Whom It May Concern Besides Me, His Mother:

The stamp I lick for this letter is paid for, along with the humble amount I send your firm, with my last dollar. I'll get by with the cabbage coming out of the garden plus the cow that Eddie used to milk. I send this to you with the hope that you will be able to find my boy. Eddie disappeared last Tuesday, I was doing the washing and called to him and am still waiting for a reply. I thought maybe he went over to the next town to see his father so I borrowed a car and paid the beast my first visit in five years. However, Ed's father was just as shocked as I was. Eddie was last seen wearing jeans and a "Grateful Dead" t-shirt but don't let that throw you, he's as pure as the driven snow. We don't have any drugs or rock concerts around here."

The rest was a typical lament from a mother who could no longer take credit for her own creation, except for the last bit:

"While cleaning up Eddie's room today I found this

picture, it dates back to the time he went out to see his cousin Karen, a girl of decent upbringing who has been corrupted by the California lifestyle. It's the only picture I've got of him since he threw his scrapbook down the incinerator."

"Probably wanted to throw her down there too, silly Mum that she is," said Kurt.

"That's been done already. Didn't you ever see the movie The Bad Seed? Read me some others."

They consisted of the normal suspicious relationships in need of a go-between. We sometimes found the missing party, but the relationship rarely worked out. Still, some people needed an economic way to wean themselves off an obsession. We functioned as an impartial third soul who would tell them they were being unconditionally screwed. Most people had switched over to analysis for this, but there were still some diehard romantics in this world. Here we were, drifting along in the very heart of Hollywood, knowing that it consisted of some very dingy dreams.

"Let's go have a margarita and get out of here. Whenever I come to Hollywood I feel like I'm aging faster." I swerved into the wide, near deserted expanse of La Brea. We parked in front of La Juerga and put on our sunglasses as we'd been 86'd the week before for trying to pay our bill with pennies in a paper bag. We'd had to assure them it was a reverential gesture from two devoted customers before they'd let us go.

We slid onto the bar stools. I always admired all the

exotic labels and their multicolored bottles lining the shelf above the bar, but stuck with tequila every time. Kurt had lack-of-love problems again, a familiar topic and something I never quite understood, given the barrage of wet looks he received. I told him to take up something he could get involved with in the meantime, like gardening. He accused me of trying to domesticate him again, which I adamantly denied. Then Kurt looked at me even more seriously.

"What is it, Kurt?"

"Listen, Rita. Have you noticed anything strange happening at Captain Ranson's lately?"

"What do you mean? Everything I've noticed since I started work there has been strange."

Suddenly, Kurt's face looked green and pale and then he swooned onto the stained carpet. This was odd behavior for him. We'd only started on our second margarita, but then he was always coming down with something. We both still suffered from an occasional malaria attack, a disease we'd picked up in Mexico. I knelt beside him and examined his face and found his pulse. Was this a man who had been slipped a mickey? Did they still make mickeys?

Kurt groaned and rolled under the nearest table. A waiter appeared, grabbed Kurt by his armpits and dragged him toward the men's room.

"It's alright, folks, everything's under control. I'm an EMT," he called out over his shoulder, though I was the only person left in the bar. Maybe my job was getting to me, but

the waiter looked like he was handling a sudden shipment from Colombia. I crossed the mental line from paranoia to intuition, gathered my liquored wits and followed at a stealthy clip. This waiter was not wearing a cropped red jacket like everybody else. He had on white pants, too tight, and white shoes. I planted my ear on the bathroom door and listened. Nothing.

"Hey, what's happening in there?" I yelled.

Silence. Now was not the time to be puritanical. I jerked open the door. Nothing against the walls, and no one in the stalls. I flew through the kitchen and out the back door just in time to see a red truck screeching out the driveway. Lord, I was going to have to do a chase scene, and the victim was someone who mattered a lot to me. I jumped into my car: no ignition. Not now, Bessie, please. I pulled my harmonica out of the glove compartment and did the breathiest rendition of "Stormy Weather" ever, flicking the starter in time. It wasn't my favorite song, but it had almost always worked with Bessie. Then again, I had never been in such a panic and it wasn't working now. Maybe I hadn't been playing the jazz station for her often enough and this was her revenge. I saw a taxi approach, a miracle in itself in this town of abysmal public transport. I flailed my arms at the driver and he flailed his back at me, as if he had majored in hysterical women. Having no choice, I abandoned Bessie and hopped in.

"Listen, I'm trying to find a red truck, this is a life and death situation."

"Oh yeah, I saw that truck going down La Brea."

He flipped on the meter and turned the car around. Flying down the busy boulevard, we caught sight of the truck burning rubber out of a gas station. The attendant was chasing it as we passed. The truck turned left on Sixth and swerved into the Park La Brea Complex. Here the chase was punctuated by octogenarians jumping into bushes as we darted around. I thought I glimpsed Kurt's slumped head on the shotgun seat next to a bald driver. If only I'd had a stun gun. The truck suddenly tore onto Fairfax and began skiing down the street, using both sides of the road. There was no way we could chase it. Everywhere cars were sideswiped and crashed into one another. The road was a disaster of vehicles. The cabbie turned the taxi around, sped through the park and out the other side. We tore down a parallel street, but when we emerged again out onto Fairfax there was nothing to be seen but cars tossed up and recovering on the curbs. I put my hands to my face, imagining the worst for Kurt. What was I thinking of? He wasn't out of our hands yet. I'd find him. I was a detective now, wasn't I? The truth was I'd never done the real street work on a case like this. But then Kurt wanted to be found, unlike most of our subjects. There was a fraction of a second interval as I wound down from the thwarted chase to the reality that I wouldn't find Kurt just then.

"Uh, where to now, lady?"

I had forgotten there was someone in the car with me. I

turned towards the driver, realizing I had bypassed taxi etiquette and was sitting in the front seat. He had little Leon Trotsky glasses on and a mane of black curls.

"Oh, just take me to my office."

I directed him as we wove northwest. I seemed to be stuck to the seat by something more than the heat. I was welded to the leatherette; just a croissant shaped bubble gum wad of ineffectiveness. I told the driver in tranced tones the bare bones of the situation. Without knowing what his cultural points of reference were, I spoke to him about Kurt, who was everything to me emotionally and close to nothing tangibly. The driver had a long face and turned off the meter. He said it bothered him. He took my hand and held it a moment and I felt some life come through me. He said he would continue to comb that part of town, while I got the office moving on it. When I gave him my card, he didn't allow me to pay him, which was a blessing since I had spent the last of my cash on our margaritas. I thanked him, and he kissed me on both cheeks, so he was Mediterranean. He swung around and headed back east.

Why was it offices often ignored their own inhabitants and gave more attention to telephones and paperwork? Usually it was a relief to enter the workplace like this as it gave me a chance to check the radar. But now I had to mobilize everyone, and not wanting to lose any time underwhelming, I decided to use the full largesse of my voice.

"Ralph!" I boomed across the room. I wasn't about to

have to repeat myself six times as usual. He was gazing at his new recruit. I knew he despised any brand of rudeness other than his own.

"What's your problem now, Rita, another case of Zen Malaria?"

"No, this one's OUR problem, Ralph."

"Oh yeah?" he gravelled.

"Yeah. Kurt, your ex-employee, was just kidnapped by a maniacal man in a red truck."

"You do like to create numbers for yourself, don'cha Rita? First day out in the field by yourself no less."

All I needed was a Ralph Ranson Guilt Trip Special right then.

"Nothing would have happened if I'd been allowed to follow my job description at my desk, boss."

All heads, already at full attention, swivelled to take in Ralph's reception of this one.

"Can't handle a little promotion, eh, Rita?"

When would I learn to stop going direct at the wrong time? More than my own ego shook since it was Kurt's throat I was cutting.

"Listen. Ralph, I give up, Kurt's out there with something demented. We've got to get going!"

Actually, Kurt was the office favorite. He still brought the employees flowers and chocolate chip cookies he baked himself, though it had been weeks since he'd worked there. Ralph liked to insinuate that Kurt worked more for the office

have to spend about six weeks in the hospital. I must be honest and say that I don't know what this will mean.

My wife and I are both doctors. I am a general practitioner and she is a specialist in internal medicine.

Our family is very small. We have two children, a son and a daughter, both of whom are now in school.

My wife and I are both very busy. We have a lot of work to do and we are both very dedicated to our patients.

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now than when he'd been on staff, but that wasn't so, as we all knew. People gathered around and I ran down the events.

"Yeah, we heard that on the radio about the nut mowing down Fairfax," said my desk's new inhabitant, Jeffrey Jones.

I had already behaved less than impeccably with Ralph and didn't allow myself to start in on J.J., not yet. Ralph rose to the occasion and put our two best on the job. They were a married couple and worked under the pseudonyms of Nate and Alice (after their favorite deli). I was a little puzzled as to why Kurt warranted two detectives. I'd never seen Ralph put more than one person on a case. I wondered how Nate and Alice would do working together since each usually seemed to discredit any working theory the other would come up with. After Ralph's initial surliness with me, I noticed he looked as nervous as if his life hung in the balance along with Kurt's. Suddenly, Kurt's question as to whether I had noticed anything strange going on at Ranson's came back to me. Ralph even told me I'd be on the case as well, but that he was going to send me to a special training course starting that afternoon. Meanwhile I was to go home and wire the basement for sound so it could be monitored in case the kidnappers tried to contact me there. I was to call in any relevant clues to Zelda, who was already raging as she clicked into Kurt's file. She had always had a crush on him.

I was driven back over to La Juerger. My car now started magically (after one ferocious kick), and I headed home. Kurt and I lived in the basement of an old gospel church

whose congregation preferred to hold its functions upstairs in favor of our rent. I usually stayed around on Sundays for the wailing, but Kurt couldn't stand it and had joined a Nigerian soccer team.

Kurt stayed home a lot now since his great aunt's inheritance had come through. He said he wanted to take some time off and just think about the next step. I thought this was a good idea although it seemed to be what he did anyway. He was into metaphysics. We both agreed that life at the Ranson Detective Agency clashed with our notions of the lifestyle we thought we should be accustomed to. Kurt had spent entire days afloat on his monk's bed, a straw mat covered with serapes. When the weather was good, he'd go up to the church patio with his sheepskins and take some sun in his underwear. The parish women, in their steaming polyester pinks, didn't seem to mind. Yet it occurred to me that I really had no idea what Kurt did most of the time when I was at work.

All this was painful to recall as I descended the stairs. Halfway down there was a little room where occasionally I saw a group of men on their knees praying. They weren't there now and I didn't know which God to direct my supplication toward. I didn't even know whether Ranson's was the agency for the job after hearing what Kurt was questioning me about and seeing what happened to him. I half expected to find Kurt musing in some corner, and checked the bathroom, the dance room, my room, and his bedroom which was painted in

serene aquamarine. I ended up in the kitchen where I opened the refrigerator and spent some swollen seconds seeing nothing as the tears finally fell. Kurt'd be pleased to see that his disappearance had spoiled snacking, one of my favorite comforts. Instead, the ice box seemed to have become my confessional, turning a large, cold, indifferent ear to my dilemma. Still gripping the handle, I blubbered out all my guilt at having taken Kurt for midday doubles. Why hadn't I been more audacious with the waiter, more intrepid with the taxi driver, more dauntless with Ralph? This was just the litany of regret that, in less pressing circumstances, Kurt and I would bewail over cups of espresso. In the subterranea of our home we were free, articulate beings, our robed bodies ready to tackle anything but still pure, untried. This was our first real challenge and I swore to the open fridge that I'd find him. I could hear Kurt saying as he always did: "You can do anything, Rita. Don't limit yourself."

We spent many days and nights saying this to each other, all the while doing nothing. There was no time for inaction now. I called the office, dialing Zelda's extension. I rarely called Zelda directly but somehow the thought of her was easier to bear than that of the others.

"Issat you, sugar bag?"

If that was an endearment, it was meant for a bum who'd just found some doughnut crumbs. I'd take them.

"Yeah, listen, Zeld, what have you heard on the waiter?"

"Nothin good. He didn't really work there, and the truck was stolen."

"Just what I thought. Have you been checking Kurt's file? Any leads?"

"Not yet, but doncha fret, if I've got anything to do with it, we'll find our boy. Say Rita, Ralph wants you to make an appointment with Dr. Delhi."

"Oh yeah? Well, tell him I'm just fine physically. I can handle this, I just want to work on getting Kurt back home safe."

"No girl, you don't get it, Dr. Delhi is your trainer."

"Dr. Delhi? Read that out again, Zelda."

"No lip, lover, Dr. Delhi, that's your man. Ralph made an appointment for you with him at 4. You just have to call up and confirm."

I spent a few hours combing Kurt's lair for useful information, trying not to get too involved in reading his voluminous batch of love letters from ladies around the globe. I called Dr. Delhi's number reluctantly, since that name did something to me; I wasn't sure what yet. I got his message machine and a deep suave voice lifted the hair on the nape of my neck.

"You have reached the inner sanctum of Dr. Delhi. How do you find yourself? Taking a tub soak and want an ear to hear? In traction and need to keep those creative juices flowing? Whatever it is, Dr. Delhi will give you his time of day just as soon as he can. Keep the faith, byeee..."

I didn't leave my confirming message till I had called up Ralph in protest.

"Who is this California quack you want me to see, Ralph? It sounds like a total waste of my time. Finding Kurt is paramount, right?"

"Exactly. I just knew you'd get defensive, Rita, so get over it. This guy is the best teacher a novice detective can ever hope to have. If you really want to help Kurt's case, you've got to know how to go about it properly. Be there."

He hung up. I left a frosty message for Dr. D. and continued my info search. The afternoon passed, long-suffering and uneventful. If the kidnappers did try to contact me, I hoped they'd do so in the daytime and when the choir wasn't practicing.

Chapter Two

Dr. Delhi lived in an industrial building in a bleak part of town which the movie studios had deserted years ago. It could have been called Southeast Hollywood, except that in L.A., south and east were directions that connoted not so much direction as poverty, so it remained unnamed. There was no street number on the building, but amidst myriad graffiti gang names in bright orange was inscribed his name; spray painted in an Asian scrawl. As I parked, not amused by this departure from the numerical code, there was a man barking into the parking meter as if it were a microphone. I didn't bother wrestling him away from his performance so I could put some change in. Cops rarely came to these places unless it was to accompany a crew filming something for television.

The massive door sprung open with a sound like a vacuum seal being broken as I approached. A tall man somewhere in his late fifties extended his bony hand to me. He was dressed in black trousers and a t-shirt of the same faded tone. He watched my quick perusal.

"Hard to keep clothes dark in this bleached-out town, don't you think, Rita?"

Dr. Delhi offered this in an almost apologetic manner, like a hausfrau making excuses for a dowdy housecoat.

"Uh, yes, I have the same problem."

I thought of my arsenal of greying, once-black dresses, including the one I had on, then quickly regained my

Dr. Smith lived in a comfortable house in a quiet part

of the town, and his wife, who was a devoted

housewife, kept a small shop in the

back of the house, and they both spent their

much attention as possible, and he remained occupied. There was

no other person in the house, and he was very quiet.

One day, as he was sitting in his study, he

heard a loud knock, and he went to the door.

He found a man standing there, and he

told him that he was a stranger, and he

asked him what he wanted. The man

told him that he was a doctor, and he

asked him if he was a doctor. The man

told him that he was a doctor, and he

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told him that he was a doctor, and he

suspicion. I subscribed to the Napoleonic Code when it came to trusting people. That's why I had wanted to be a detective in the first place. It would have worked just as well if I'd decided to be a journalist.

"How did you know I was here already? I'm early, you know."

His small smile faded, as if he'd expected me to know why and was already disappointed in my powers of divination. He led me into his establishment on his arm, like a ballroom dance teacher. It was a huge circular room, with low couches all along the walls. Everything was covered in oriental carpeting. In the middle of the room was a periscope. I looked into it, expecting to see the street but what I saw was a Viewmaster scene of Disneyland.

"I'll just get my coat and we'll be off."

"Excuse me, but it must be 90 degrees outside."

Dr. Delhi looked at me as if I was speaking some archaic form of English.

"Interesting, a reference to the mysterious it. Of course, you mean the weather. Least of our worries, dear girl. This garment turns negative ions into positives."

It looked like silk and was the color of seaweed.

"Algae."

I suddenly felt dizzy. He seemed to be reading my mind, an experience I'd only had previously with no one but my closest friends, and even then sporadically.

"Where are we going? How is this going to help me find Kurt?"

"Keep the questions flowing, but don't expect the answers to be immediate. It's the process we're interested in."

This man made me nervous. He seemed certain I was his faithful apprentice and that we had all the time in the world to find Kurt.

"Look, I've already had a guru and two therapists so don't start any California consciousness stuff with me."

"Cut the paranoia, dear, I have no intention of being your father figure or the grandfather you never had but always wanted. I'm merely being underpaid to initiate you into the realms of subterranea. I must say it usually provides me with more diversion than my steadier income does."

I didn't bother inquiring what that might be. He seemed like the kind of guy that could get rough on a tangent the way others might on a fifth of Wild Turkey.

We were already making our way down delicatessen row. Dr. Delhi asked me to pull over and then proceeded to procure a leaking container of chicken soup. He sucked it from a straw as if he had the insides of a car and it were gasoline. If I had to hang out with this guy very often I was going to have to talk to him about cleaning my car.

"It's your brain I have to try to make some sense of. You've got a real mess in there."

"I'm really getting bothered by your mind probes. How do you know what I'm thinking when you just met me? And what does this have to do with finding Kurt?"

"So prudish, for a modern girl! Let's head up to the observatory."

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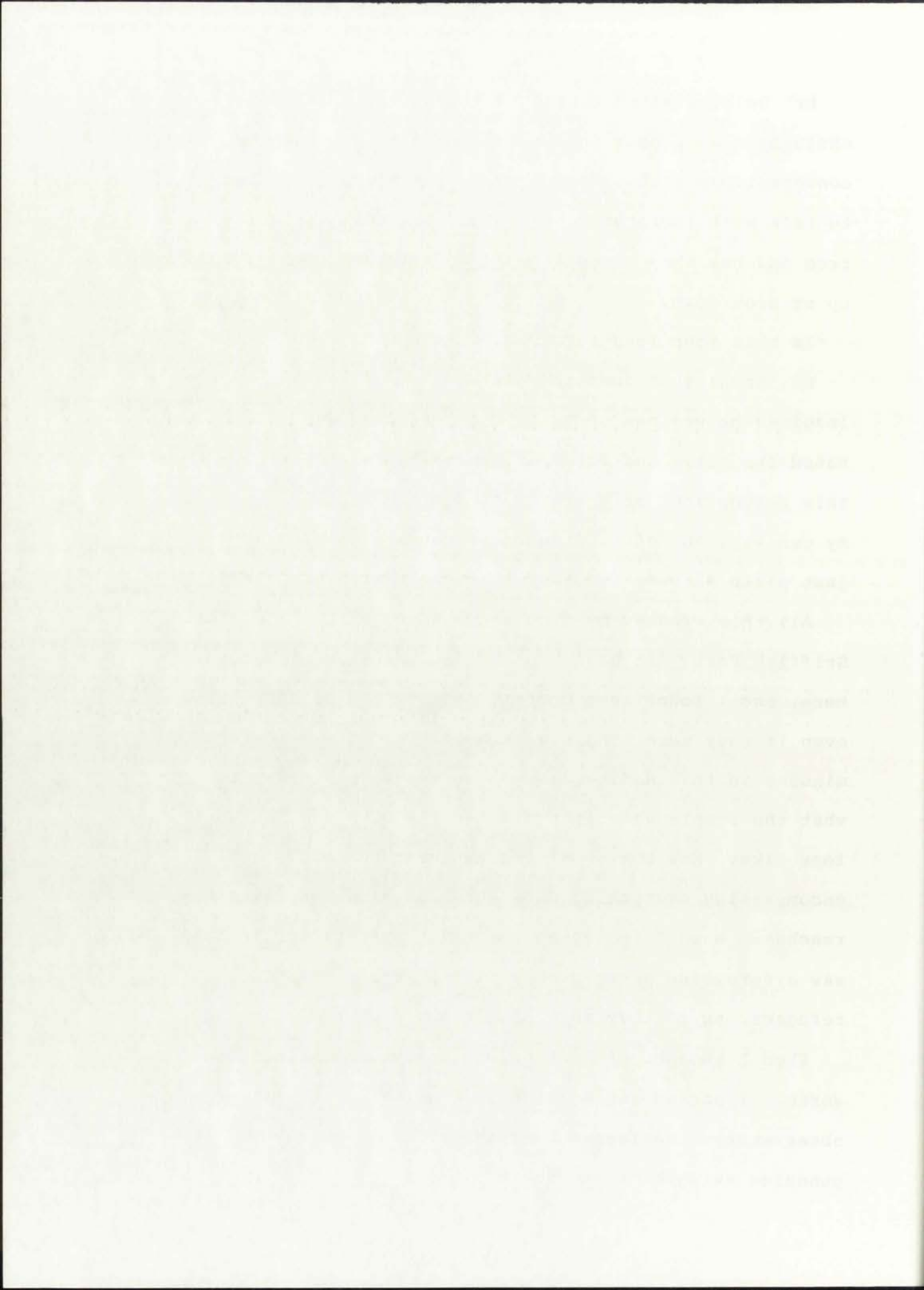
Dr. Delhi started playing with the radio, singing along, exclaiming at people in the cars next to us, and engaging in conversations with pedestrians. He especially seemed to like to talk with immigrants, and would ask them where they were from and how they liked L.A. I didn't know whether to speed up or slow down.

"Is this your long term plan to rehumanize the city?"

Dr. Delhi just deepened his dimples at me in response. I imagined he was one of those citizens who deeply loved and hated the city, and found it necessary for his sanity to do this networking, or whatever it was. I was like that too, in my own way, and often frequented certain bars, canyons or just plain streets in order to connect with the place.

All this crossed my mind as we wound up the road through Griffith Park. It had been a long time since I'd been up here, and I found some comfort looking at the soft hills, even if they were tinged with smog. I lost myself for some minutes in this Mediterranean landscape, which was in fact what the people who first planned the city had intended it to look like. Now L.A. was like an immense sound stage encompassing everything from Venetian canals to Wild West ranches. When I looked at the daily street life in L.A., I saw a sprawling generic city filled with the world's refugees, as if they were unpaid movie extras.

Then I thought of Kurt, alone somewhere, blindfolded or worse. I parked and we went up the stairs and into the observatory. We leaned over the railing and watched the pendulum swing back and forth awhile.



"Strange how no one has thought to use this setting for a criminal act yet," mused the doctor.

"Edgar Allen Poe did," I offered.

"So he did. In fact I usually tell my initiates to read him."

We wandered into the auditorium and sat down surrounded by a bunch of adolescents.

"Dr. Delhi, why are we here?"

"That's quite an existential question for a budding detective."

"I meant why did you bring me here?" I sighed.

"Well then. The first step for a detective is to separate yourself from your assumptions."

"What do you mean by assumptions?"

"I mean things you've been told and now believe without ever having checked them out yourself. Much of this starts in the schools. You came up here as a child, didn't you?"

"Yes, but I don't really remember what I saw."

"I can assure you it was something that showed the immenseness of the universe in Is, Was, and Evermore Shall Be proportions. We Americans have a hard time realizing how limited the world's goods are. That the fast food hamburger today comes from cattle in Central America which are destroying the rainforests and hence, our oxygen supply. That people who insist that their hair has to be sprayed erect have contaminated the ozone. But I'm not telling you anything new Rita. Let's look at why."

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The lights dimmed. The film we were shown was called The History of Combat. It started out showing hand-to-hand fighting, wrestling, then dueling and the use of weapons, bombs, and the like. It was a 20 minute pastiche of everything from the warrior's code through 40s ethics and ending with playing it dirty in the 80s. I expected the teenagers to yell and cheer, but the action was disengaged from any notion of good guy or bad guy.

The audience was silent. I felt like screaming. I couldn't bear violent films and had to force myself to watch. It made such little sense to me and scared me, as if it was actually happening. Maybe it came from growing up in Hollywood and being left at matinees all day when I was a kid. The movies had always been vivid to me in ways that real life rarely matched. I resisted the impulse to wedge my nose into my companion's shoulder, my usual practice during such movies. At last it ended and we all filed dazedly out of the theater. Maybe Dr. Delhi's point was that I'd have to take up going to horror movies just to get jaded.

"In part, Rita."

Dr. Delhi didn't quite begin a conversation as much as he continued it where you had left off thinking. We were on the long balcony which surrounded the building. The city below was a glimmer of silver chromed cars and chlorine blue swimming pools. The moon shone through the deepening blue of the late afternoon.

"The projectionist is a friend of mine. He agreed to show that little collage of mine."

The light breeze, the first of the season was rising.

It was a beautiful day, the first of the season.

The sun was shining brightly, the air was warm.

The birds were singing, the flowers were blooming.

The children were playing, the old people were smiling.

The world was full of life, the world was full of hope.

The future was bright, the future was full of promise.

The world was a beautiful place, the world was a wonderful place.

The world was a place of love, the world was a place of joy.

The world was a place of peace, the world was a place of harmony.

The world was a place of beauty, the world was a place of wonder.

The world was a place of mystery, the world was a place of magic.

The world was a place of adventure, the world was a place of discovery.

The world was a place of excitement, the world was a place of thrill.

The world was a place of joy, the world was a place of happiness.

The world was a place of love, the world was a place of compassion.

The world was a place of kindness, the world was a place of generosity.

The world was a place of honesty, the world was a place of integrity.

The world was a place of truth, the world was a place of justice.

The world was a place of freedom, the world was a place of equality.

The world was a place of peace, the world was a place of harmony.

The world was a place of beauty, the world was a place of wonder.

The world was a place of mystery, the world was a place of magic.

The world was a place of adventure, the world was a place of discovery.

The world was a place of excitement, the world was a place of thrill.

The world was a place of joy, the world was a place of happiness.

The world was a place of love, the world was a place of compassion.

The world was a place of kindness, the world was a place of generosity.

The world was a place of honesty, the world was a place of integrity.

The world was a place of truth, the world was a place of justice.

The world was a place of freedom, the world was a place of equality.

"You made that film?" It must have been clear from my voice, if not from my thoughts he seemed to be scanning, that that was one of the most gruesome movies I'd ever witnessed.

"Not impressed with my editing abilities? Never mind. What I wanted to show you is that you are operating under an integrity, as it were, that is decades old, something that the media and the masses no longer do. You probably still watch old Fred Astaire flicks, doncha?"

"Occasionally. And I'm still holding out for someone as alive and courteous as he was."

"And as unrealistic."

"Okay, romance aside, does that mean I have to give up my ethics to be a detective?"

Dr. Delhi was suddenly looking very busy checking out some of the younger female members of the audience who were bending over, looking through the telescopes.

"Some looksist you're turning out to be. When are we going to talk about Kurt's case? Trying to talk with you is like trying to discuss something intelligently with Harpo Marx!"

"Exactly, Rita, now you're catching on. Harpo is one of my role models. One of the first premises a modern detective must go on is that life is absurd. You must be outside the game in order to find someone who's stuck in it."

"Now we're talking, just how do I do that?"

"Piece of cake or jawbreaker, you decide. There are two major points of view on the matter. Life as sacred or life as a mess. A place for everything or everyone out of place."

"I'm totally confused."

"Of course you are, because you're still trying to make sense when all we can do is make cents and dollars, marks and yen."

"Now I've really lost you."

"Well, get with it, girl. The religion of today is money. You know that. Absolute fact in this country and getting to be that way everywhere else. Even more than sex. They don't even need the starlet anymore to sell the car. The car, symbol of our city more than any other, vehicle of our age, sign of security, totem to isolation, assassin."

"Do you mean that being alone is destructive?"

"Almost. It can be used negatively or positively, obviously. Yet seeing ourselves as separate entities instead of focusing on our similarities is what's killing us."

As if in punctuation, an old man started to wheeze. Dr. Delhi's green grey eyes darted around my face. He placed a finger on my forehead for a moment.

"Either you have a very underwhelming attention span or you haven't slept well in some time."

"Both. I'm also prone to worrying and find it hard to sleep in a house alone and Kurt had been coming home really late from these spiritual meetings he attended all the time."

"Did you tell that lioness of a computer at Ralph's about them?"

"I think she's a Black Panther."

"I was referring to her temperament, not her politics."

What's her name again? She's got the most developed sensory perception mechanism I've seen for a machine. Outdoes most people as well."

"Yep, that's Zelda. I gave her every name and number of the sundry medicine men and masseurs that I found in his room this afternoon."

"Well, let's go have a drink. Maybe you'll pull off some predictive dreams. There's a latent psychic ability in that confused mind of yours."

I felt nauseous on the way down the hill, and assumed it was because Dr. Delhi was driving.

"If you don't have a drink tonight you may never be able to enjoy one again. After that mickey cocktail incident you could develop a strong aversion to alcohol."

We went to The Phone Booth, one of those 60s hangouts that had been recreated in this year's renovation on the Sunset Strip. It was darkly lit and in each spacious booth was a telephone with which you could call any of the other tables. I'd never been there, and the idea seemed hokey to me.

"None of that," reprimanded the doctor. "You're much too young to have such a closed mind. This is one of the few places in town where you have the possibility of connecting with others in a novel way. Of course, most people only call other booths if they know the people, but some of us just call the others and chat it up, and not necessarily for a quick pickup. The telephone, and a number of other things such as miso soup and the symphony just might get

civilization through the 21st century. I try to call my mother and all my ex-wives at least once a month. It keeps my unconscious cleaner and helps me get through the astral plane and on to more helpful dreaming states."

I was feeling drained. I just couldn't believe that my only chance to find Kurt hinged on this character. Unfortunately, it did. On my own, I didn't have a clue where to begin. Dr. Delhi didn't react to having overheard that one, and he went to the bar and came back with fig daquiris.

"The fig is a very overlooked fruit. It's an antiseptic and a very good antibiotic. It can cure the crazies in women and soften up a tough guy."

"Very informative, Doctor, but how am I going to find Kurt?"

"Difficult only by nature of its simplicity. By just being, as it was done back in the sixties except that most folks found it too hard to stop suffering and crawled back into their dull jobs, and S&M relationships. The yuppies have really been a retrograde trend, and not even aesthetically enlightening. I used to have some hope for the punk scene, but it was mostly a storefront for a pricetag, just another reason to buy leather and metal and get your hair done."

"Dr. Delhi, will you stop philosophizing for a moment and tell me what I can do about finding Kurt?"

"What do you propose? The Greater Los Angeles Phone Book? The want ads? Computer dating? Give it up, Rita. These people are slick, and Kurt won't be found until they want him

to be, or at least till they give us some tidbits to work from."

The fig daquiri was taking effect. I put my head in my hands.

"Just give me something to go on."

"All right. My, you're so innocent in these matters! It's kinda nice, after all these cynical types I've been initiating lately. Rest tonight in the near-certainty that Kurt is okay. This is a strange case. But then, Kurt is a rare bird himself. I trained him too, you know. My hunch is that they're examining him. You've got to hold onto the image of Kurt in your mind, to the essence of him. Don't let it go! None of his negative takes, only the stuff that furthers him. It's his spirit that's in danger, and from what I know, he's got a rather remarkable one.

"What do you mean, his spirit? Sometimes you really sound mumbo jumbo to me."

"Mumbo jumbo is an Anglo expression used to neatly classify all that stuff us whiteys don't want to admit exists."

"You're probably into voodoo as well."

"Only as a dance/trance technique. The Haitians and the whirling dervishes have that one down amazingly well. If you knew some yourself, you might hasten the process of recovery for Kurt."

"What are you talking about?" I stared at my empty glass in disbelief.

"You still think you're powerless, doncha, girl? The best thing for you to do tonight is to go home, put some soul music on, and dance with Kurt's spirit."

"My mother would say that you're nuttier than a fruitcake."

"And you are and aren't your mother. In fact you half believe me. It makes sense to you deep down in that soiled soul of yours."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean not intrinsically impure but slightly on the toxic side lately. You need a good sweat bath."

I brushed my wrist against my nose to check my perfume leakage. It was still in effect.

"Don't tell me that a hot tub installation is next on the agenda."

"I'm actually referring to the Sioux purification lodge."

"Afraid I can't afford that model this year."

"Well, if you can't afford a few willow branches and some hot rocks, we'd better talk to that boss of yours."

"Look, I'm pretty urban, education-wise. I can barely keep my house plants alive."

"I can imagine. Well, you can come over to my place next time I give a sweat."

I didn't even want to think of what Dr. Delhi's friends and other initiates would be like. Just then the phone rang. Dr. Delhi jumped as if he'd just won the Mexican national lottery.

"First time someone's called me here tonight. Wonder who it could be..." He looked around the room sheepishly as he picked up the receiver.

"Yezzz? Well hmmm, ahhh, certainly!" He hung up.

"Who was it?"

"A woman with a tantalizing voice box reverberation would like to see me in the lounge. The lounge. Didn't know they had one but it must be back there near the bathrooms." He rose.

"Dr. Delhi, be careful!"

"Yes, one must be careful, especially with the complimentary sex." He looked at me for a moment without focusing on me. Doing a dramatic turn, he walked to the back of the restaurant. Paranoia took his place. I immediately lit a cigarette. I didn't inhale them, but the sight of the smoke curling away sometimes calmed me. I exhaled away, trying to blow out my paranoia as well. It didn't work. I snuffed the butt and decided to take a peek into the lounge. It was a narrow space with a public phone between the bathrooms. Empty, as I feared. There was a back exit. I opened the door and found the parking lot also empty. I checked the ladies' room, where an ancient woman was mopping the tiles. I asked her if anyone had come in or gone out in the last five minutes. She shook her head no. I didn't like head shakes. It was easier to lie that way than if you actually had to say something. I didn't know what else to ask, so I went to the men's room. An old codger was washing

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his hands. It would have been too much to ask for two empty men's rooms in one day.

"Have you seen a middle-aged man dressed in black with a greenish jacket?" I asked him.

"No!" The man answered, totally appalled. "The ladies' room is next door," he added by way of dismissal.

"Just how long have you been in here, sir?"

"What's it to you, lady?" He looked at me and realized I wasn't going to leave till I got my answer.

"Maybe five minutes," he surrendered.

"Anyone else come in?"

"Nope."

I didn't like that word either. It wasn't far from the head shake.

"Well, thank you very much just the same. I'm a private investigator. If you see anything strange, or remember anything, contact the Ranson Detective Agency, here's my card."

"Sure, lady, happens to me alla time."

I saw him shoot a screwball look at his reflection. There was nowhere else for me to look, so I swished back to our empty booth. I gathered my things and what was left of my sanity. I approached the bartender, who looked at me as if I'd been jilted. Getting ditched would have been a breeze next to this. I paid for our daquiris and put my ribs on the bar and looked over. Now they really thought I was bagged. What did I care? Today I'd lost Kurt, and now this kook. I

ran outside, circling the building. Got in my car, which actually started after one ferocious kick. I darted around several blocks, went back, checked the bathrooms, stalls and all, which were now empty. I was in shock, but managed to call Zelda's number. At night she doubled as the message machine.

"Hello. It's after hours at the Ranson Detective Agency. All our private eyes are out on the prowl so please leave your message at the sound of the beep..."

"Zelda? You're not going to believe this, but I think whoever kidnapped Kurt just got the Doctor."

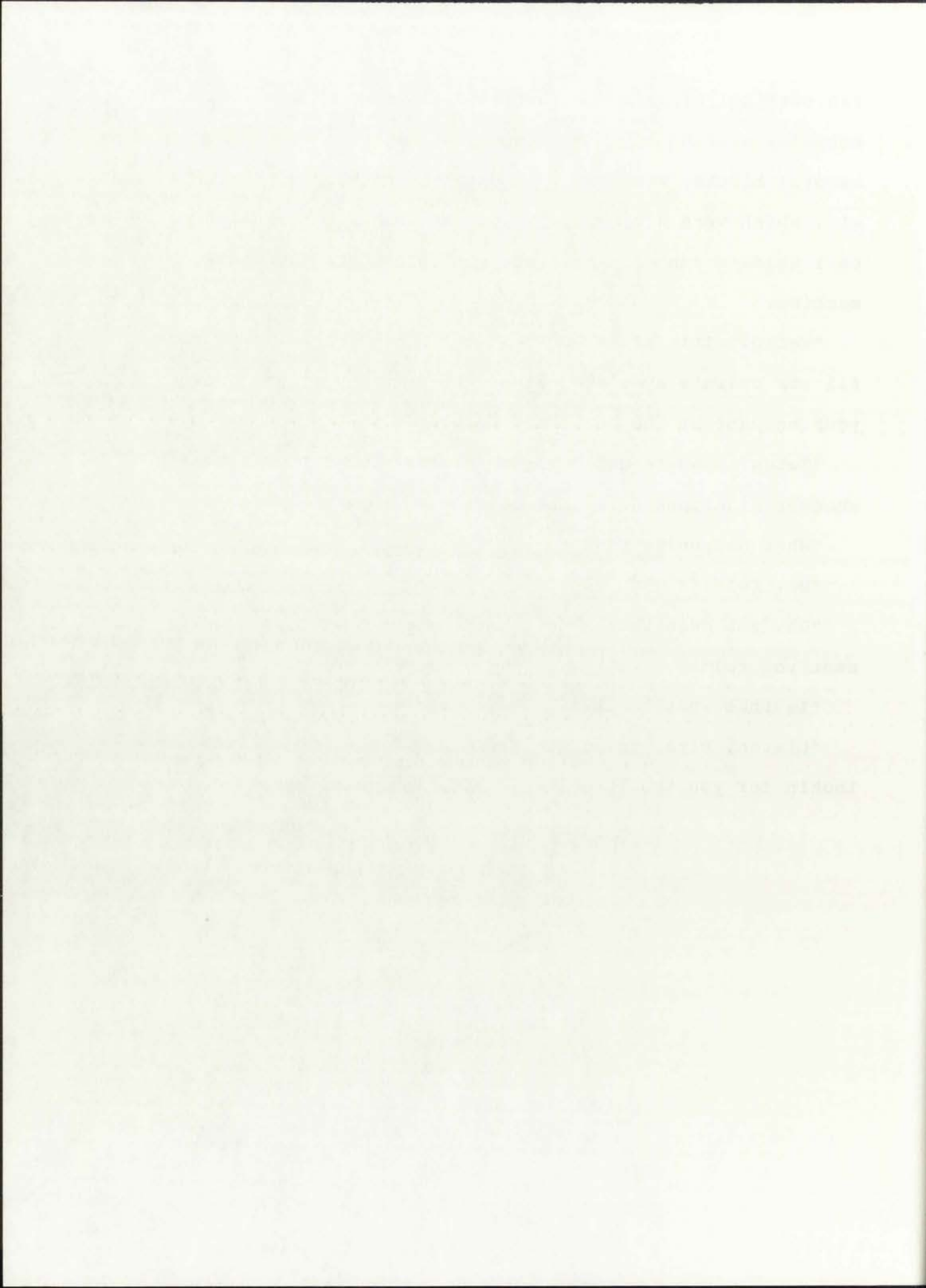
"Whaz happenin, who?"

"Dr. Delhi!"

"Oh, you mean that midafternoon dance show host Ralphie sent you to!"

"Is that what he is?" I felt faint.

"Listen, Rita, get outta there right now, or we'll be lookin for you too, precious. Get right over here!"



Chapter Three

As I left the Phone Booth, I felt afraid for my own safety. If these kidnappers had gotten Kurt and the Doctor, maybe I was next. Now I knew why detectives and spies were partial to trench coats and other protective clothing. It was a war out here, and they were fighting it for the general populace. Detectives were the most unsung heroes of all. However, in the heat of L.A., trench coats would stick out like snow. Kurt had taught me a mantra for protection, and though I didn't believe it, I repeated it to myself: lions in front of me, bulls behind. Eagles above me, snakes below. Quite an entourage, I thought, car key in hand. Just as I put it in my car door, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I whirled around, using my backswing to deflect whatever had its grasp on me. My wrist was immediately caught in the hand of...

"Dr. Delhi!"

"Sorry to disappoint you."

"Are you kidding? I'm relieved. I thought they'd gotten you, too."

"Rita, please! Stop using these vague pronouns. Referring to Kurt's kidnappers as 'the others' only gives them more power. It's not supernatural beings we're after. A detective must be as precise as possible."

"How can I be precise when I don't have the slightest idea who we're dealing with, Mr. Midafternoon Dance Show Host?"

"You should be impressed at my flexible nature. It earns me an adequate living as well. All I'm saying is don't focus on the indirect object until you've examined the motives of the subject - me in this case."

"Look, talking grammar to me is the biggest waste of time yet."

"None of this would be a waste of time if you were a little more willing to learn. Just put your judgments in limbo until you've got some more info to go on. Take this minor incident you panicked over. Why did you think I'd been kidnapped?"

"Well, what was I supposed to think? You disappeared, just like Kurt."

"Don't be so defensive, Rita. Let's analyze this. Did I disappear just like Kurt? Did you see me dragged off?"

"Uh, no, but you were gone. I couldn't find you anywhere."

"Okay. That's the point where you begin. What do you know about my behavior patterns?"

"Erratic."

"Good. So what's more likely, me being kidnapped or me following a lead?"

"How should I know? After today, anything's possible."

"Anything's always been possible, Rita. It's just that the dangers of the world have suddenly touched down close to you. But that doesn't mean you throw your powers of discrimination out the window."

"You should be interested in my researches," he said.

He was speaking in a low voice, and the light in his eyes

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"So I should have sat there in that booth, knowing that someday you'd come back to me?"

"That's another paranoia that will get you in trouble. Men and women of today fear being left so badly that they don't even wait around long enough to see if they really have been abandoned. A detective can't afford to be ruled by emotions. You must know just when to be patient and when to act. It was perfectly in order for you to check the restrooms and the rest of the place. But once you did, the only possibility you considered was that I had been kidnapped."

"So what did happen?"

"I had a tete-a-tete with a woman who knows where Kurt is."

"What are we standing around philosophizing for? Let's go get him! Where is he?"

"Down, girl. Not so fast, and certainly not so easy. I must admit it bruised my male vanity that she didn't simply want a rendezvous with me."

"Get off it, Dr. Delhi. Kurt was probably kidnapped because he was your apprentice. They must think you're running a finishing school for spiritual adepts. That's why they contacted you and not me."

"That would be flattering, though I know you're just accusing me. No, it's more complicated than that. He was kidnapped because he's useful to them. Kind of like Pocahontas. Did you know that she was kidnapped by the

as I should have been in that position, meeting that

question, you'd come from the east.

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English before she was converted to their religion and married one of them?"

"No. But I'd rather hear about Kurt right now."

"Of course, and you will. But don't forget to examine the historical angle in a case. It can be extremely helpful."

Dr. D. was leading me back to the Phone Booth.

"The other thing I like about this place is that it's nearly impossible to trace a call here. All these phones are merely extension lines. I come here often in disguise so the waiters won't recognize me."

"Why are we going back to the Phone Booth?"

"I want to get Zelda going on this new info. But I've got to make sure they don't listen in on our conversation. They contacted me to try and assuage our fears about Kurt. Something about how he's getting voluntarily initiated into a spiritual sect."

"Only in California could a kidnapper use that ruse. I don't believe it for a second."

"Neither do I. But we have to pretend we do and come back in here and have another drink like everything's cool. No doubt they've got someone planted in here who was watching us."

"But we'll be wasting precious time when we could be finding Kurt."

"Not really. It's more important for us to do a little rusing ourselves. There's only one thing. These people are no doubt into something of a psychic nature, and may be

capable of short range telepathy, so don't do any speculation about Kurt until we're out of here."

I couldn't have been given a worse sentence. I, unlike most of my fellow Angelenos, did not have the least desire to control my body with gyms or my mind with meditation. I considered that Dr. Delhi was off on a tangent but decided to go along with it. In we walked.

I realized now that I hated the place. It epitomized the pretentiousness in L.A. that I despised. The juke box worked with bills, not coins, and played CD's of new age bands with esoteric names. I liked soul music and Mexican songs. This stuff sounded emotionless to me. Visually it was the same hype. People kept trying for that casual look but instead it seemed like they'd spent five hours and five hundred dollars to achieve the effect.

And here they were, trying their best to look good and be seen. Who could blame them? They had no idea what a sense of community consisted of. How could they pull off this latest attempt at cafe society? The lost generation only worked as a cultural stimulus for the first generation that felt it. It had been a long time since World War I. Kurt and I had only glimpsed the mystery of true community during our years in Mexico, but we could recognize it enough to tell the difference.

Dr. Delhi and I slid into opposite sides of the same booth. The telephones were bright red and everything was green or polished wood. At least it wasn't another minimalist grey place.

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"What have you got on tap?" I inquired of the waiter, who was dressed like a telephone repairman. His low slung belt was full of tools. On his tray there was a message machine, and he lowered this down to our table and pushed a button. Out came the message:

"This evening we have Moët et Chandon and Poilly Fuisse on tap."

"Don't you have anything normal and cheap like beer?"

The waiter looked puzzled. Dr. Delhi waved him away.

"The waiters here don't speak English. The management must pay minimum wage. They get mostly immigrants. They probably figured out the message machines as a way to take advantage of all the refugees in L.A. I do my ordering at the bar. They have a multilingual bartender."

"That's a disgusting system."

"If you're looking for non-exploitative services you're in the wrong town. Would you like another fig daquiri?"

"Sure, whatever."

He got up and went to order them. I struggled with my mind as if it were a hyper puppy. I tried to pick out the person who might be watching us, but all I found were more particularly hideous details of the place. There was a woman in a safari suit and hat with a poodle on her lap. Several of the customers were actually mannequins. At first I hadn't even noticed them. I was too busy thinking about Kurt. Dr. D. was back with the drinks.

"I like how you're focusing outward more. It will help you when you turn inward again."

"What about Zelda? Did you call her?"

"Yes, from the men's room. Now drink up and let's go."

I took a long swig of fig daquiri and put my bag on my shoulder, although standing up was problematic. Dr. D. steadied me; he paid at the bar, and we were out of there.

"I didn't think I could take hobbling my mind for another minute. I don't think I can drive, either. I'm pretty looped."

"You're going to have to. The only thing I know how to drive is my motorcycle."

"Are you kidding?"

"No. We'll just go slow."

Dr. Delhi waited until he was tucked into my car and we were moving slowly down the street. Then he sprayed something on the inside windows of my car.

"What are you doing? It's hard enough driving as it is. I'm pretty looped. Can we talk?"

"I think so. This is a little San Cristobal aerosol holy water. It deflects telepathy vibes by de-greasing the alpha waves it comes into contact with. I'm not sure how it works, but I've done a number of experiments with it since I found it being sold in Tijuana. I'm fairly sure we won't be overheard now, but I won't be able to read you either for awhile."

"Great! I feel more relaxed already. Now, will you please tell me what you found out about Kurt?"

"Before I do that I need to ask you what your real connection is to Kurt."

"What do you mean, my real connection? You talk as if we're KGB spies."

"I truly need to know, Rita. Your information might help us track him."

"Well, in that case I'll tell you. Kurt is more than a surrogate brother to me. He's like how I would be if I were a guy. We have the same doubts, the same feelings about life. We lived in Mexico together. We survived getting crushed on each other at different times and didn't give up on our friendship even then. Everyone else in my life comes and goes. But Kurt is always there. This is the first time he hasn't been."

"All right. I was just making sure. It's a close connection you two have; my telepathy couldn't completely fathom it."

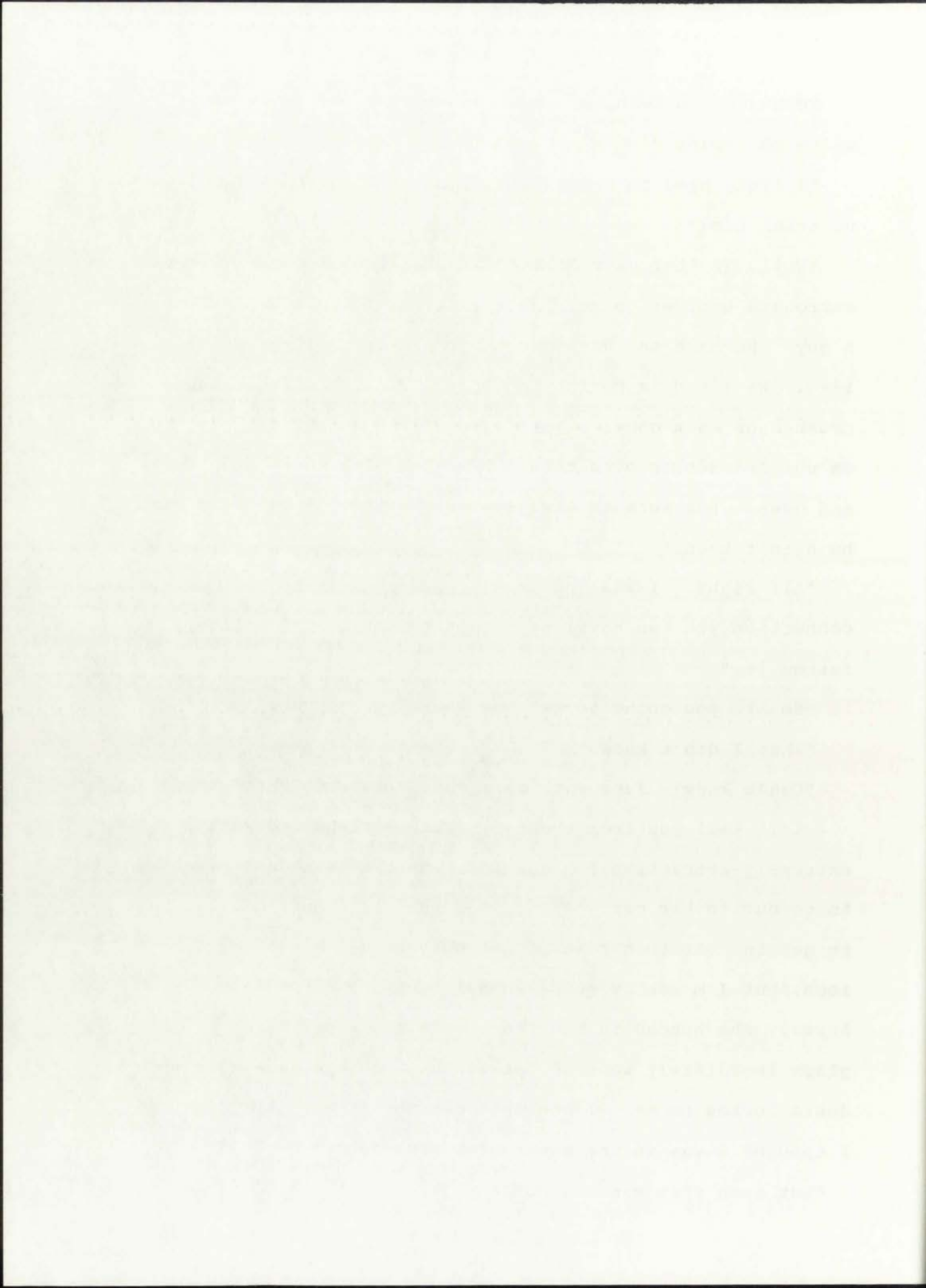
"So are you going to tell me where Kurt is now?"

"That I don't know."

"Don't know? Just what were you doing with that woman?"

"I'll tell you from the top. This dark-haired woman, extremely attractive I might add, approached me and asked me to go out to her car. She opened the back door and told me to get in. At that point I got nervous. I might act like a lech, but I'm really quite sheepish on the first date. Anyway, she hopped in the front seat and a partition of heavy glass immediately went up between us. At the same time the doors locked on me. I couldn't get them open. At this point I thought I was in the hands of a sex fiend."

"But then what was she doing in the front seat?"



"Good question. She told me she was part of a group that had Kurt. That we were not to worry, the kidnapping had actually been arranged with Kurt some time before."

"That's not true! He would have told me!"

"Maybe. We'll see about that later. But you can start feeling funny when anybody tells you they're part of a group. The only group that people are any good at getting out of is the nuclear family. And even then it can take years of therapy to really deal with. When an adult person calls herself a group member, look out. There's probably a near impenetrable belief system behind it. Anyway, this woman, who remains nameless, told me Kurt was being initiated."

"That's the biggest bunch of hype I've ever heard! Kurt hates groups, unless they're soccer teams."

"Well, she said they had decided to tell me because they thought I understood things of a spiritual nature, initiations and such. She told me that Kurt was perfectly all right, and in fact I could speak with him on the car phone. She told me to pick it up and dial 976 KURT, which I did. I thought that was a tasteless system. Anyway, it was Kurt who answered, or at least it was his voice."

"Don't you think his voice was attached to him? Could it have been a recorded message if you had a conversation?"

"You can't rule anything out. Kurt said hello and apologized for not having contacted us sooner. He said the mysterious leavetaking was part of his initiation. That like initiates of certain tribes worldwide, he had to undergo a

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process of disorientation, like kidnapping, in order to be accepted into this secret society."

"That doesn't sound like Kurt. He might talk about the lack of rites of passage in modern society, but he'd never do anything like that. He's too uptight."

"Yes, I know what you mean, but maybe he's crossed a threshold..."

"What else did he say?"

"That he would be back soon and that we should stop investigating, that he would not press charges. Then the woman told me I was free to leave. I thought to jump out, open her door and grab her. No sooner did I have one foot on the ground than she sped off. Of course there was no license plate."

We were back at the office. At least it was after hours and I didn't have to deal with Ralph. Zelda was surrounded by a flurry of printouts and had had someone change her into combat fatigues. She usually wore a killer red dress. I let Dr. D do the talking. On the whole, Zelda was nicer to men. I thought it was revolting to program a double standard into an office machine. Ralph insisted it was cute.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Zelda dear, especially in that charming new outfit." Dr. Delhi extended his hand to her. She patted it.

"Nice to see you too. Now don't commence with the flirting. That's why I changed my appearance. We've got work to do, so let's get busy."

Dr. Delhi fed the rest of the information he had already told me into Zelda. Then he asked to see the last few cases that Kurt had worked on while he was still at the agency. Most of them were the usual husbands and wives spying on each other. But one of the last cases was something I'd never heard Kurt talk about. The client was a man with a Japanese surname. He had hired Kurt to investigate two different murder cases. The first was one I'd read about in the papers a few months ago. It was an incident involving 14 people who had all died in a bar downtown. The cause was chemical, but apparently it had not been anything in the alcohol or the amyl nitrate. The other was a single man who had been murdered on a bus. The autopsy had revealed a scratch on the man's calf apparently made by something like a point of an umbrella. The man's blood had contained something the coroner's office could only identify as a lethal combination of rattlesnake venom and rat poison.

"So Kurt never mentioned any of this to you, Rita?"

"No. But he was putting in longer hours, and when he quit, I thought he had burnt out on the usual boring clients. What were his findings, Zelda?"

"Honey, this is all I can tell you. Kurt searched out diligently anyone he could find in connection to the 14 people in the bar and the man on the bus. Each of them had permanent restraining orders for anyone coming to investigate. The case was given over to the DIA."

"What's the DIA?" I asked.

"The Defense Intelligence Agency. Kurt was given specific orders not to discuss the case with anyone. This information has been erased from all the disks. But I still have it in my memory."

"Bless your mind, Zelda." Dr. Delhi patted her head. I thought Zelda would take offense but she didn't. "What about the Japanese guy?"

"He disappeared soon after the DIA took over."

"No wonder Kurt was stressed out. Don't you think we should continue his investigation?"

"To no avail, Rita. That's a good way to get Kurt snuffed, and ourselves as well. We've got to play it extremely cool until he comes back. In fact we should go home right now in case anyone's following us."

"Home is the last place I want to go right now."

"Too bad. Anything else would look out of the ordinary. Besides, I don't think anything more will happen tonight."

I didn't like it, but I hoped he was right. I drove Dr. Delhi to his place. Then I crawled back to the basement. I even put on salsa music and tried to pretend I was dancing with Kurt's spirit, feeling like a jerk most of the time. The phone rang once, but there was nobody there when I answered it. I finally collapsed on my bed around 2 a.m.

Blessedly, I had passed an uneventful night thanks to the dancing and one small purple pill, a light trunk. I opened my heavy lids and stared at a poster of Donovan in a geranium patch. I tried to recall what decade I was in.

Stick to the facts, I thought. There was the clock, big hand on the 12, little one on the 9. There was my jade and obsidian jaguar from the Maya, next to my rock collection. Those things were from days that had been more alive than the ones in this town where exotic countries were reduced to boutiques and then to piles of clothes and jewelry in a closet, books of pictures on shelves, food eaten once a month in a restaurant.

There were no Gregorian chants or Van Morrison hits coming from Kurt's quarters. There was the absence of Kurt, a nonpresence that affected me more than anything I'd ever felt before. I heaved back the feather bed. It felt like it was filled with beans. I got right down to the business of coffee. Then I saw that there was a message on the machine. It was Zelda.

"Honey, it's 8:15 and don't even mention it's Friday or I'll have an attack. I've been on all night and there's no new word on Kurt. You're to go straight to Dr. Delhi's."

I couldn't believe it - another session with the doctor. And Zelda's new attitude seemed to be "don't ask me questions I can't respond to." On the kitchen table was a book Kurt had been reading called In Search of the Miraculous. I leafed through it, but it seemed to be the usual esoteric metaphysical literature I could never make any sense out of. Just what was Kurt dealing with? It was something nasty if it had anything to do with those chemicals, that was for sure. Could I carry on Kurt's investigation? How was I

going to get beyond the DIA restriction? Maybe Dr. D's telepathy would come in handy yet.

I thought of Zelda as I climbed the basement steps to the street. Zelda was the only articulate being I knew who hated Fridays. Of course, for her, the weekend signified the dark side of the moon. No one was around since Ralph refused to pay overtime, even for a big time case. Until this thwarted investigation of Kurt's, I didn't think we had any.

Hard heeled, I crossed the street to my car, feeling piqued about absolutely everything. The streets were clogged with odds and ends of humanity trying to finish off another week. After just a few blocks of driving my feet felt as if they had been wading in the La Brea tar pits. There would be no transcending this particular day. The smog cut off the mountains, granddaddy sun put his hand on my shoulder and one hot finger under my chin. But mine was not the only suffering unfolding that day. There were Latinos selling oranges, bloods selling roses. I winced to see another bracero bow his head to the sidewalk, right across the street from a sign which claimed that 5% of his wage dollar went to bomb his people back home.

Maybe the migrant workers had it right. You did your stint here for some good money and then you went back home or someplace more real. Here a person could have periods of being vivid or confident. But most of us were striving for rarely received rewards, our clothes styles and rents changing unlike the seasons and basic premises and salaries, which seldom did.

The city only got browner as I sped southeast. It was one of those pre-summer mornings that looked like the back of the tongue after three cups of coffee, or like life-meets-death-and-loses. I realized I was angry at everything: Kurt's involvement in this strange case and the fact he'd told me nothing, Dr. Delhi's hip coolness, and Zelda's secretiveness when I wanted her outrage. Then there was the no trespassing symbol of the DIA - another intimidating institution to deal with. I wanted Kurt back, and I wanted my comfortable, if at times routine, life with him.

Soon I found myself sitting in Dr. Delhi's inner sanctum. The doctor was behind a partition, changing his clothes. He had been working on his motorcycle when I showed up.

"So what about your name, are you an Indiaphile?" I didn't bother keeping a small sneer out of my voice.

"Behold, wounds can speak. No dear, I'm Jewish, but I wanted a name with an ambiguous identity."

It didn't impress me. "So why are all Ralph's budding detectives sent to a midafternoon dance show host?"

"You should have probed Zelda a little further for a background check on me. I happen to have written some detective novels back in the fifties that were quite well received."

"Just how old are you?"

"67."

"I thought you were in your fifties!"

"Cup of miso, shot of sake before bed, lots of sleep and exercise; I sired a son three years ago."

I didn't believe that kind of stuff. It was too Ripleys for me so I didn't comment. Besides it bothered me fairly deeply. Here was this geezeball having kids. Since I'd turned thirty this kind of news jarred me. I felt far from starting a family of my own. He was staring at me. I felt as if my forehead was transparent. He went on:

"The royalties still come in now and then. In many ways, being a detective is a self-taught profession. Some novices have used my books as a guide or as a source of comfort. I was in Haiti when I started writing them, hadn't written as much as a letter in my life up until then. I was studying voodoo and trance states at the time. I got to the point where I was hearing voices. Apparently this detective stuff was all I connected up with."

"You expect me to swallow that just because Ralph sent me over here? You're unbelievable."

"Perfect! The exact point from which to start your stint as a detective. I'm a little impressed by you and your cynicism. Usually it takes them longer, especially the ones Ralph sends over. Kurt himself was way too gullible. I thought I helped him with that, but now I have my doubts."

"So maybe this training process is a waste of our time."

"I'm afraid there's probably nothing better for you to do until we have more to go on or Kurt resurfaces. So get started. Right off the bat I'm recommending you take up playing things like video games and billiards. You're too used to concentrating on the first thing in front of you. Of

It is a very common mistake to think that the

the only way to solve a problem is to try to

change it. There are many other ways to

solve a problem, and it is often better to

change the way we think about it than to

change the problem itself. This is because

the way we think about a problem often

determines the way we solve it. If we

change the way we think about a problem,

we can often find a better way to solve

it. This is why it is so important to

change the way we think about a problem

before we try to solve it. This is

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course, you're myopic, but you must learn to compensate. You're too prone to endless contemplation. Pool will put you several steps ahead. The video games work with the oldest part of the brain, the reptilian brain, survival stuff. If you want to get good at sleuthing, you've got to think a lot faster and more openmindedly than you have been. You can go ahead and read my novels if you like, there's some street stuff in there. But the truth is, you've simply got to move into a mentality of seeing behind things, beyond reasons people will use to confuse you with, and into discerning what connects a series of apparently separate random acts."

He told me he had a session with his nautilus machine, and he left strict orders for me to play his pinball machine for an hour. I loathed pinball and those frustratingly ineffective little flippers, but I did it. I actually got somewhat better and then worse as my worrying took over.

Chapter Four

It was Saturday evening, and suddenly I felt as lonely as Zelda. I couldn't tell anyone what was going on as Dr. Delhi had told me it might risk Kurt's life to do so. Trusting people was always hard for me, and now I had a good reason not to. The few people I could call to chat with would ask about Kurt, and I didn't want to lie to them. Neither did I want to go to a shrink and pay for a professional to keep my secret. L.A. was an isolating place on any given day, but now I felt completely alone. I felt so low I even thought of calling my parents.

My parents didn't know I lived with Kurt. They would be shocked to find out that I lived with a man. However platonic the situation really was, they wouldn't understand it. My parents lived in Twenty Nine Palms, on the road to Las Vegas. They rarely came into town. It jarred them that the L.A. they once knew was pretty much gone, so I usually went out to visit them. My basement digs in one of the rough parts of town would have upset them as well.

I came from a mixed marriage. My mother was from Chicago and my father had left Cuba as a child. They met in Miami, and got married in Chicago. My grandparents had disowned my mother before the wedding, so it was a simple, ten minute ceremony. My parents had moved to Los Angeles, hoping that the climate and the atmosphere of tolerance generated by the

"I Love Lucy" show would be kind to them. My father had established his own drapery business at the height of the craze for those heavy, floral drapes everyone had back then. My first dresses were all made of that material. I hated them, and was only spared the humiliation of wearing them to school because I went to Catholic school and wore a uniform.

I was fair skinned, and no one knew I was part Cuban until they came to my home. The only Spanish words I learned as a child were swear words. I took up Spanish when I went to U.C.L.A., about the time my parents moved to Twenty Nine Palms. Later I went to Mexico as a way to try and connect with my Latin heritage. I felt very comfortable there. Life and death were old brothers who laughed at each other in Latin America. But the Mexican world was not mine; I had to face the futuristic music of the country of my birth.

Since moving back to L.A. I had lived a double life, in terms of my parents. They had both become devout Catholics in their advanced years. When I called them now, they wanted to know if I'd been to confession lately. The fact that I lived under a gospel church had no meaning for them. They saw Protestantism as a watered down, almost gutted version of their church.

By eight o'clock I thought I'd call them anyway. After all, it was Saturday so I could say I was thinking of going to Mass tomorrow. Just then a key turned in the lock, the door opened and there stood Kurt in a double breasted suit. My chair fell to the floor and my mouth fell open.

"Kurt!" I exclaimed. I was on him in a second, alternating hugs with holding him at arm's length to check for damages.

"Hello, Rita, how are ya?"

"Kurt! Where have you been? Where did you get that suit? Are you all right?" I'd never seen him in a suit before. I wasn't sure I liked it. I had to admit it looked good on him, even though he looked like a campaigning politician.

"Yes, Rita, I'm fine," Kurt said. He was full of big smiles and seemed very nonchalant about the whole thing.

"What happened, who are they?"

"I can't tell you much since secrecy is part of the initiation, and anyway it doesn't matter."

"Initiation? What the hell do you mean, initiation?"

"Well, you know I've been dabbling in metaphysics for some time. I found out about this group that was actually practicing some of the things I was reading about. I went and, uh, found out about them and after I decided I wanted to try some of their techniques, they said they'd accept me for initiation."

"It sounds like a cult!"

"Not at all, Rita. It has more to do with working on your own psychological problems and your relationship to the divine."

"The divine?"

"Let's just call it the spiritual world, the over soul."

"Kurt, why didn't you tell me about all this before?"

"Because I was sworn to secrecy the moment I decided to be initiated."

"But don't you see? You could be brainwashed by now! That's what spiritual cults do! It happens all the time in this crazy town!"

"Nonsense. I never felt better or more lucid in my life."

"That's probably what you'd say after a lobotomy, right?"

"I think I would feel different after a lobotomy, don't you?" Kurt was being extremely unruffled and polite. I felt almost as worried as when he was gone.

"I'm not sure you're capable of feeling anything in the state you're in!"

"I'd say you're the one who's in a state, Rita. Calm down!"

"All right. But can you please tell me where you were and what happened to you?"

"Well, I've pledged not to disclose the initiation rites but I can assure you, I was very well taken care of. It was quite pleasant there, big garden, simple food, fine library, and they did all my dental work for free."

"What are you talking about? The library, the food, dental work, for crying out loud, you were kidnapped! Just let me see that smug mouth of yours." I grabbed him, dropped his jaw and swung him into the light. A lustre reflected off four gold molars.

"What have they done to you?" I looked at Kurt helplessly. "Are you going to level with me?"

"I think they did a good job, in gold no less."

...and I was very much surprised to find...

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"Come on! You're talking to me, Rita, your soul sister. I know you wouldn't get involved in something like this of your own will."

"Look, Rita, give me a break! I trust these people. I'm fine, my teeth are great. They feel so smooth you can't believe it. The pain I used to feel is gone."

"But Kurt, did you ask to have the dental work done?" I felt truly lost about how to get through to him. "I've never heard of kidnapper dentists before."

"Lighten up! I was not kidnapped at all. I was initiated."

"Into what? The school of dentistry? I bet you didn't even ask if the gold came from South Africa or not."

"Don't worry. The gold is what this organization puts its profits into, rather than leaving it to the care of a bank. It's what money is supposed to stand for, right?"

"And when they want their money back they'll hack your teeth out like the Nazis did to their victims. Right?"

"I can see there's no point in talking to you right now. Besides, I'm famished."

Kurt rummaged around in the kitchen and heated up some black beans and tortillas. I wasn't hungry. The beans were as hard to swallow as Kurt's talk of his pleasant stay. Where had he been? Why had they filled his mouth with gold? Were there radio transmitters in those crowns? What had they filled his mind with? He acted as if he'd been taken on a cruise or something. The thing was, he seemed open, but it

was not the kind of openness I wanted. He was all serene smiles, and he had this infuriatingly detached air about him. Where was the angst-ridden Kurt I knew and loved?

"So what have you been up to, Rita?"

"I've been looking for you ever since you were slipped that mickey! Of course, Ralph wouldn't let me do anything. He just sent me to some kind of trainings with Dr. Delhi."

"So you finally met Dr. Delhi. Interesting fellow, isn't he?"

"I don't know. He seems like a womanizer. I think he just uses all that psycho babble to pick up nubile girls in puss print dresses on Melrose."

"Did he try it on you?"

"No. I guess I'm not his type. Did you know he's 67?"

"Really? That's amazing."

"Listen, Kurt. I found out about those murder cases you were investigating. Do they have anything to do with your kid...er, initiation?"

"No, Rita. Of course not. Ralph gave the information over to the DIA. Ralph said those cases were too big to handle at our outfit."

"What were those cases about?"

"I dunno. Something about chemical poisonings. I'm going to go take a bath."

Kurt bathed while I fumed. I still thought there might be a connection between the murders and his kidnapping, but then I didn't think Kurt would lie to me. Just as soon as he was

bathed and frumping around in his bathrobe, I questioned him again.

"What's with you, Kurt? Where's the old confused Kurt I know and love?"

"So, Rita, you'd rather have me be miserable like before?"

"I guess I'd just like to see you being more real, more like the Kurt I know..."

"Get over it, Rita. That Kurt is dead, thank God! I'm a new man, and I'm here to stay."

"So, who are you?"

"I'm Kurt, but I'm not fighting him anymore. I'm at peace with myself."

"Should I order a funeral wreath? I don't understand what's happening anymore. First you get kidnapped, then I go into this bizarre training with Dr. Delhi, then you come back and say you weren't kidnapped when I saw it with my own eyes, and now you're like this."

"Like what?"

"Like some emotionless zombie. I can't even imagine having the kinds of conversations we used to have about things. We really used to talk about how we felt with each other..."

"Come on, Rita, we were screwed up. I don't want to be like that my whole life. Do you?"

"I've got it, you fell in love! Didn't you?"

"Oh, Rita, you're such an old adolescent. Love has nothing to do with it. I simply learned how to conquer my emotions."

"Don't try that Hinduifornia language on me, Kurt; I've heard it before."

"You see, Rita, it's hard to communicate when you're being so closed-minded. I think I'll go to bed now."

"Yeah, and take your little conquered colonies of emotions with you!"

Kurt leaned over and kissed me goodnight, on the bangs. As if he didn't know I hated to be touched on the top of my head. I took it as another gesture of condescension and said nothing. I was hurt. I'd lost Kurt, more irrevocably than I'd ever thought I would. He was my best friend, and now I was left high and dry with only my own thoughts running around in my head. So, like hundreds of people seeking new age spirituality in California, Kurt had "found it". Whatever it was, I didn't think it was for me. Was all spirituality like that? He looked like the people I knew who had been in love with the wrong person. The glazed over expression, the bliss, and then the rationalization of the bruises, physical or mental.

Kurt's behavior had been radically altered, all right. Two days ago he was a sentient being, my soul brother. Now he seemed to recall nothing of our deep friendship. I considered the possibility that the person I was sharing the basement with wasn't Kurt at all. That would explain how he could be so cool, not to mention how he could pat my head upon retiring. But the stronger fear in my mind was that he had been brainwashed. I still felt there might be some

connection between Kurt's kidnapping and the murder cases he had been investigating.

I leafed through the pile of Kurt's books that were scattered around the basement. The titles always seemed to promise to unravel the meaning and mysteries of life, but as I tried to read them, I always became confused. I felt tired and depressed. Sleep seemed like a good idea, but it remained a concept for many hours. My mind bounced off ideas and clues about Kurt as if it was a pinball machine.

I decided to call Dr. Delhi up. Maybe he could explain the new Kurt. I called his number and his message machine claimed he had gone on vacation. I wondered if the kidnappers had gotten him too, but there was some hokey Hawaiian music in the background of his message that could only be Dr. Delhi's touch. Apparently Dr. Delhi didn't give a damn about Kurt. I finally fell into a fitful sleep.

The next day I went in to talk to Ralph about it.

"There's nothing to talk about, Rita. We turned those cases over to the DIA a month ago. I don't see any connection between that and what happened to Kurt. Anyway, Kurt refuses to press charges so the case is closed."

"And you're going to accept that? Don't you have any dedication to your profession?"

"Not if there's no client."

"I'm your client, then."

"No you're not, Rita. I'm your boss and I pay you. When you start paying me maybe we'll have something to talk about."

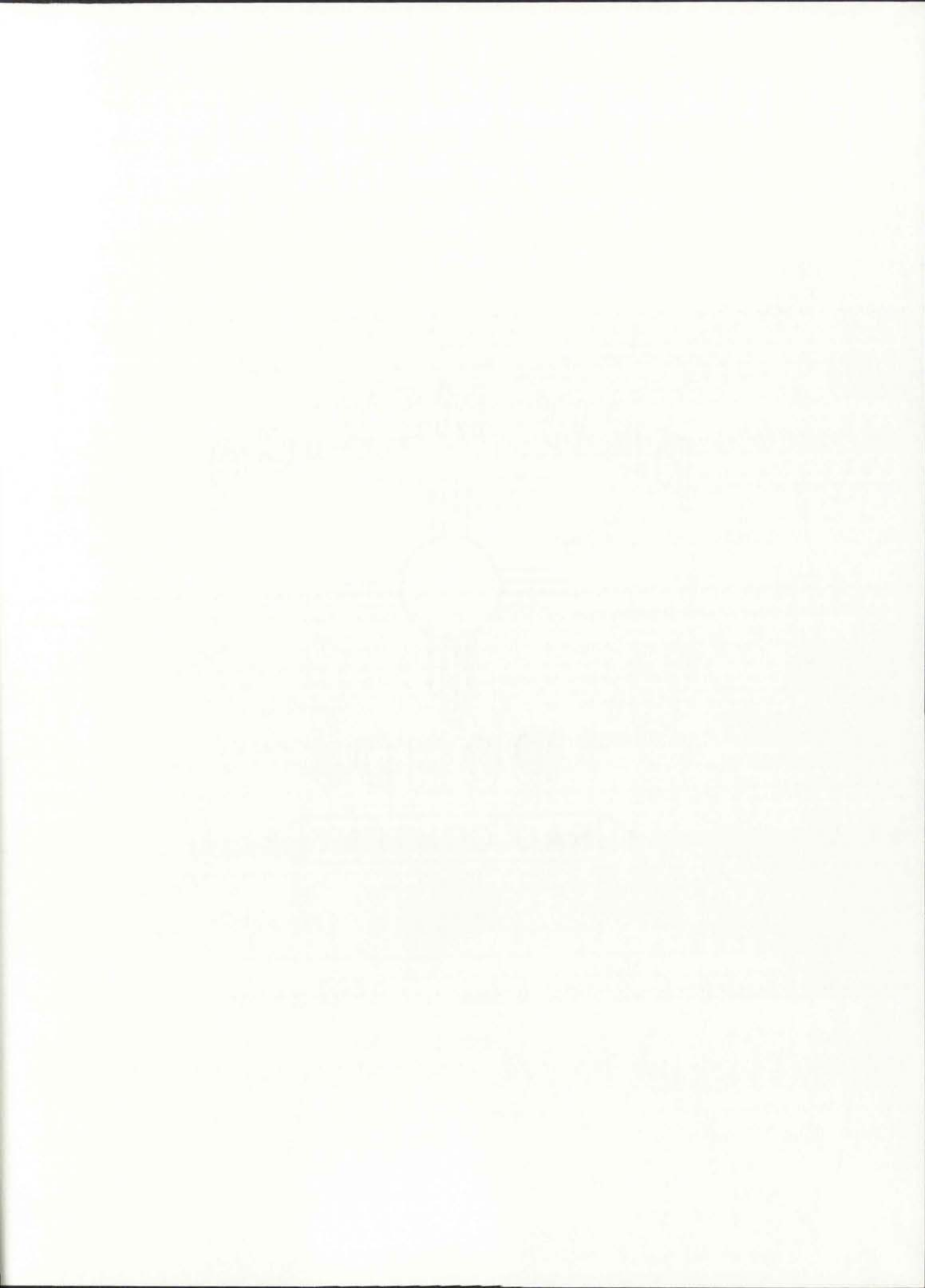
Now get to work. I need those letters done by the end of the day."

If I had ever believed that a detective agency was necessarily the place to investigate some of the deeper issues of life, I was wrong. I was crushed. I was back at my desk job. Ralph's "friend" had been promoted to detective, and I had been given the flimsy new title of Assistant Chief Correspondent. At my old salary, naturally. Even my training with Dr. Delhi had been cancelled by Ralph. At first I was relieved. I didn't think I could handle two swamis in my life just then. But between writing letters and worrying about Kurt, I gave Dr. Delhi some more thought. He was full of as much spiritual dish as Kurt, but Dr. Delhi seemed still tied to at least a few of his emotions.

A few days passed. Kurt resumed his metaphysical reading with a vengeance I was sure he was pouring some of those conquered emotions into. He hardly ever stopped for meals, much less to talk to me. He spent a lot of time at meetings of "The Conquerors" as I referred to them.

I was increasingly worried about Kurt's involvement with this spiritual group. I even tried to follow him to his meetings, but I lost him every time. I often tried to engage Kurt in some kind of debate about his new beliefs, to not much avail. Now there was just my ranting and Kurt's ever growing indifference to it. I felt like we were some old married couple, except I didn't know what I was fighting. There was no alcohol, no abuse, no nothing. There never had

been, but now my favorite companion, still there in body had checked out on me, support-wise. His physical leave taking was not long to follow.



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