

# Exodus

By Keith R. Fentonmiller

*1957 Los Angeles*

She was right there when I turned from the garlic bin. I gagged on my half-chewed Tums and choked down the chalky shards. A leather headband restrained her mane of jet-black hair, while her spaghetti strap dress exposed so much neck and shoulder I thought I was back home on Brighton Beach. What really razzed my berries was her scent. Roses. Not just one rose or a bouquet, but thousands, millions! Every rose that had ever grown or would be grown. The entire essence of roses condensed into a single whiff. It transported me back to Ebbets Field, 1941. I was ten at the time and couldn't tear my eyes from this girl selling peanuts, as though she had a magnet behind her face and my eyeballs had turned to iron. First, I smelled roses. Then, her denim overalls brushed my naked knee. "Nuts?" she'd asked. I was struck dumb. I gazed into her leather headband and sniffed like a hypnotized moron with a runny nose.

"Did you hear me?" asked the woman, yanking me back to 1957.

"Sorry?"

She pointed at my wicker basket. "I said, you took the last four Purple Stripes."

"Purp—? No, this is garlic."

"Purple Stripe is a type of garlic."

She had to be off her rocker. There weren't types of garlic any more than types of baseballs, right? Then she pointed to the display case, divided into quadrants labeled Purple Stripe, Rocambole, Porcelain, and Artichoke. The Purple Stripe quadrant was empty because I'd swiped the last four.

Sheesh, could I have been more of a schmo?

"What're your plans for the garlic, if I may ask?"

"Brisket," I answered. "My bubbe's recipe." Crud. Someone dressed like the twin sister of the Land O' Lakes lady wasn't gonna know a bubbe from Shinola. "My grandma's recipe," I added.

"She used Purple Stripe?"

"Dunno. She cooked with the big, fat, white kind."

"Yours are purple."

"I figured they'd ripen. Like green bananas."

She shook her head pitifully, the same way Rabbi Lipschitz had shaken his head after catching me with saltines during Passover, 1943. Yeah. Yeah. I knew the rule. No leavened bread products. But I'd discovered saltines were actually one-thirty-second of an inch thinner than standard-issue matzos. Confirmed it with Gramps' calipers. Did Rabbi Lipschitz care? He most certainly did not.

"You want Elephant Garlic," she said, "It isn't actually garlic. It's a leek and tasteless. I'll prove it."

She grabbed an Elephant Garlic and bulbs of Rocambole, Porcelain, and Artichoke. After prying a clove from each bulb and peeling their papery coverings, she reached into her cart, which held at least ten loaves of sourdough bread. I kid you not. What? Was she running a prison? She tore a hunk from one loaf, ripped the hunk into four, and plopped a clove on each piece.

She smiled mischievously. "Go ahead."

My neck got hot. I tugged at the collar of my Hawaiian shirt and looked around. Except for a few frumpy housewives picking through

limp arugula, we had the produce section to ourselves. I eyed the garlic-covered bread warily. Although I was about as Jewish as a Twinkie, I abided by that stupid Passover rule (saltines excluded). I told the lady it wasn't a religious thing, just a habit, like not walking under ladders or watching out for black cats. Know what she did? She brought a denuded clove to my lips. Know what I did? I opened my mouth, and in went the garlic. I salivated, chewed, tasted, and swallowed. And guess what? I repeated that public display of mastication three more times. Good thing Jews don't believe in Hell.

I had to admit, the impromptu picnic was quite the education. The real garlics tasted rich, unlike that leek pretending to be garlic. I'd stuck toothbrushes in my mouth with more taste than Elephant Garlic. I told her that.

"The Purple Stripe tastes even better," she said. "You'll see when you make your bubbe's brisket."

My heart sank. Had Bubbe meant to lace her brisket with bland leeks for seventy-odd years? I couldn't ask her, because she was dead and buried in Washington Cemetery. Whatever she'd known about garlic and leeks had dissolved into the clay with her flesh and bones. The worms of Brooklyn knew more than I did.

Now the woman was looking at me like I was a charity case. "On second thought, never mind. The Purple Stripes are yours, fair and square." She started wheeling her cart away.

Aw jeez. This was turning into Ebbets all over again.

"Technically," I called after her, "they're not mine until I pay for them."

She stopped.

"I'm more like a bailee of the bulbs," I continued, "or a licensee with an exclusive option to purchase. What the hell do I know? This is a guy who got a C-minus in Property class." I placed the bulbs in her cart. "All yours."

Her face brightened. “You’re a prince. I could kiss you.”

“That’d be fine. Go ahead.” I desperately wished to reel my words back in, but it was too late. They’d already landed in her ears.

“It’s just an expression,” she clarified.

As the heat from my neck coiled around my face, I got another whiff of roses. It had to be coming from her headband.

“Is that tanned with rose oil?”

Her eyes widened. “How’d you know?”

“My gramps worked with leather. A hobby of his.”

“Leather’s my profession.” She chuckled and covered her mouth. “That sounded naughty, didn’t it?”

I didn’t know if that was a rhetorical question. My throat made a strange gasping sound.

“I meant I’m a fashion designer. Leather reminds us we’re animals, creatures of the land. And you can’t beat the odor. Flesh, sweat, and dust. Like a tiny, bare-chested cowboy is holed up inside. Quite sexual, when you get down to it.”

Another gasp from my throat and then, “With everything you know about garlic, I thought you were a chef.”

“Raymond’s the garlic guru. But he’s not a chef either, just my husband.”

“Oh.”

Criminy. I’d sounded far too disappointed. Nothing was coming out right.

She smiled. “I haven’t seen you at Bel Air Market before.”

“I’m new in town.” I tapped my ball cap’s cursive B. “Brooklyn, born and raised. Ever been?”

“Like a million years ago. I spent summers with my aunt. She teaches at Pratt.”

“Ever make it to Ebbets?”

“Sure. Even sold peanuts one summer...1941.”

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I palpated my left pectoral in a futile attempt to calm my heart.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Yeah. Fine. It’s just that... Never mind. It’s stupid.”

She touched my elbow. “No. Ask. Please.”

“Did you wear a leather headband that summer?”

“I’ve worn leather headbands forever. That’s a funny question.”

“This is gonna sound even funnier. I saw you at Ebbets in ’41.”

“How would you possibly remember?”

“You were my first crush. Always regretted not introducing myself.”

She stroked the ends of her shimmery hair. “I guess now’s your chance.”

“I guess it is.”

Only I didn’t take the cue and introduce myself. I gaped at her. Again.

She swooped in. “I’m Virginia.”

As I was answering, a shard of Tums hiding in my soft palate broke free and smacked my uvula. “I’m How—.” I cleared my throat. “Howard.”

“Good to meet you, How-Howard,” she teased. “Listen. We’re throwing a soiree for Raymond’s television folks. Since you’re new in L.A., you should drop by.”

“Sounds swell.”

I checked my watch.

“I’m keeping you.”

“Nah. I gotta catch a bus—well, bus-es.”

“This is L.A., Howard. You need a car. We’ve got an old jalopy, if you’d like to borrow it.”

“Gotta learn to drive first.”

“Where are you going that requires three buses?”

“Chavez Ravine.”

“Ooh. Watch out for Old Joe Lee.”

“Who?”

“Joe Lee, the ghost. An acquaintance from Chavez Ravine says Old Joe haunted his house. Might still, I don’t know.”

“Joe Lee, you say? Sounds Chinese.”

She shrugged. “I guess.” She then pulled a pad from her purse and wrote her address. “Party’s at seven. Feel free to bring a date. Do you have a girl?”

“I have an Esther.”

“What’s an Esther?”

“I meant yes. Her name’s Esther. She’s flying out at the end of the school year.”

“Are you engaged?”

I hesitated. “Yep.”

“You sound unsure.”

“Why would I be unsure? Esther’s everything a fella could want in a woman.”

“How so?”

“Oh, you know...”

She folded her arms. “No, I don’t.”

“Well, she’s real salt of the Earth. Solid. Reliable. Sturdy.”

Virginia raised an eyebrow. “Esther sounds very... functional. I’ll let you go. Later, gator.”

I dropped my empty basket at the exit, next to the pyramid of coconuts. The microscopic tremor in the floorboard triggered an avalanche of hairy spheres that nearly inundated me.

#

Esther really was the salt of the Earth. In kindergarten, she stood up to Sheldon Finkel when he got rough with me on the swings. She comforted me with Yoo-hoo and Bonomo Turkish Taffy during my

folks' divorce in junior high. She got me through algebra, tutored me on the French kiss, and introduced me to the boob—both of 'em. Last year, she handed me a list of 152 reasons we should marry. If I hadn't been such a coward, I would've told her the list was incomplete. I didn't love Esther. I wanted to. I really did. I begged God to make my heart swoon for her. When that failed, I shelled out ten bucks for a shaman and twenty on a fortune-teller. Bupkis. I cancelled my appointment with the Voodoo priestess after deciding my love life wasn't worth the slaughter of an innocent chicken.

I fumbled along, rudderless, until August '56, when I took Esther to Ebbets. In the seventh inning, Newcombe served up a cookie of a pitch to Aaron. He smacked it deep to left, right toward our seats. Esther grabbed my glove and made the catch. In all my years going to Ebbets, I'd not once caught a ball, and here, only the second game of Esther's life, she nabbed one. She said, "You can have it if you'll marry me." I smiled, but that's all. She gave me the ball anyway. Good old Esther. That night, as my head (and the baseball) lay on the pillow, I recalled a lesson from my Sunday school days. Under Jewish law, if someone gives you something valuable while proposing, and you take it, you've just entered a marriage contract. No kidding. But suddenly that silly rule made perfect sense. Hammerin' Hank's foul ball was a sign from Fate.

I'd deluded myself.

While nibbling on a saltine the next morning, I broke into a cold sweat, my esophagus caught fire, and my heart thrashed against my ribs. I started popping Tums like gum drops. In January, I finagled a law job with my crooked Uncle Rahm in L.A. and told Esther it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I built it up, implying I was a shoe-in for partner, and we'd get to rub elbows with the stars. The only catch—I had to start right away.

Esther was happy for me, but she lamented the idea of moving so

far from family and having to quit her teaching job. That was good. I figured with five months apart, her reservations would stew and ferment and fester until she called off the wedding. Indeed, after I moved to Bel Air, her letters expressed greater and greater despondence, which (to my shame) made me giddy.

Everything was playing out perfectly... until the day I met Virginia, or rather, the day she and I were reunited.

After returning from the market, I changed into more professional attire: a navy suit, a lime-green shirt with checkered collars, and a brick-patterned necktie. As I was leaving, Western Union knocked on my door with a telegram from Esther.

*NEED TO TALK. IN PERSON. PAN AM FLIGHT ARRIVES IN  
L.A. AT 9:30 PM.  
MEET ME.*

Cripes.

I plucked the souvenir foul ball off the telephone table and squeezed it hard, as though I could pulverize the damn thing. What a schmuck. I popped a Tums, then bolted for the bus.

#

Ramshackle houses stood among the winding grid of dirt streets and bulldozed piles of broken lapboard, flapping tar paper, and rusted, corrugated metal. There were no road signs—none standing anyway—so I had no clue where Pine Street might be. I started down the grassy slope, stopping when I spotted an old woman tending a garden. My heart reared because, for a second, I thought she was Bubbe. She cut the same figure: flowy dress, short, stooped shoulders. She even had a mahogany cane like Bubbe's. I chuckled when she raised the cane to scold a scraggly goat who'd wandered into her garden. Bubbe used to scold Gramps the same way whenever he ventured into the kitchen. Come to think of it, it wasn't that funny.

Whoah!

Suddenly, I was ass-deep in a shrub, while my briefcase was soaring downhill. A girl lay next to me, on top of a Kelvinator box she'd repurposed into a crude toboggan. She'd taken out my legs a la Jackie Robinson sliding into second. Between belly laughs, she answered that she was all right and then pointed me toward Amparo Puga.

Uncle Rahm had been explicit: Don't scare Mrs. Puga or the other three families. Offer them a few bucks courtesy of boosters for the L.A. Dodgers. Boosters, hah! They were mob-owned construction firms that stood to profit handsomely from a new stadium in Chavez Ravine. It would be a flashy, gilded tabernacle of steel and concrete, compared to its rickety, humble ancestor in Flatbush. To avoid front-page photos of lawmen dragging away old ladies and little girls, the "boosters" were offering the holdouts "financial encouragement" to vacate well before the City Council's vote on selling the land to the Dodgers. And what if the holdouts refused this encouragement? Uncle Rahm wouldn't say.

Mrs. Puga pulled a pipe from her apron and lit it. She spoke in the direction of a purple foxglove plant, where two green-backed hummingbirds sucked nectar from tubular flowers. All I caught was, "I'll smoke as much as I want, Papacito. You, of all people, have no right to judge."

I introduced myself while handing her a business card. She complained of aching bones and told me to help her inside, which I did.

She led us to the kitchen, where she propped her cane against the oven and put on a teakettle. I tell ya, if I'd squinted at her and substituted the cornmeal odor for chicken stock, I could've been standing in Bubbe's kitchen. I asked about the strings of bulbs hanging over the sink. Some were garlic, she explained. Others she smoked to ease her sick lungs and rotting bones. The kettle whined

as she spooned dried leaves into two teacups. She gestured for me to sit at a small table on which she'd set a basket of piloncillo bread, and then poured hot water into the cups, causing blood-red rivulets to leech from the leaves. After she sat opposite me, I pulled a document from my briefcase and set it before her.

"I do not understand, Señor Howard. You offer two thousand dollars, but the city already bought my house."

"It's for moving expenses, as long as you leave Chavez Ravine by August. After that, the sheriff will arrest you for trespassing on public property. It's better to sign this paper and take the money, wouldn't you agree?"

Mrs. Puga relit her pipe, then studied my business card, sounding out my name. "How-ard Le-der-man. We have met before?"

"I don't see how."

I uncapped a fountain pen and slid it toward her, but she reached over the pen and offered me the bread basket. I gave her a Reader's Digest version of Passover, so she wouldn't think me rude when I declined.

"You never eat bread?"

"Not never. Just for a week."

She sighed. "I'd happily give up bread forever to stay on my land."

Like Bubbe, Mrs. Puga was expert at inducing gut-ripping guilt simply by adding a sigh to even the most innocuous of phrases. I brought the steaming cup to my lips and took slow, careful sips, while she puffed her pipe.

"My ancestors settled Chavez Ravine," she said. "Their children and their children's children were born here. Their ashes and umbilical cords are buried in the garden that grew the very leaves in your cup."

I briefly panicked, convinced that the tea leaf clinging to my tongue was a piece of dried-up umbilical cord. I set down the cup and surreptitiously spit into my palm.

“My husband died in the Pacific,” she continued, “my Rafael in Korea. Gave their lives for the soil in that garden.” She raised an arthritic fist. “Tierra y Libertad! No, Señor Howard. Keep your money. Just let my people be.”

The old woman coughed violently. Her eyes turned rheumy.

“If the sheriff comes—and he will—there will be a struggle.”

“Good. Only if I go out fighting can I join Papacito and Rafael.”

“Join them?”

“As hummingbirds.”

“Sorry?”

“When my people die a warrior’s death, the hummingbirds come for our souls.”

I shrugged. “My ancestors used to purge their sins by spinning live chickens around their heads.”

Mrs. Puga looked ashamed. “I must confess something. Where the Armory now stands was once a graveyard for your people, Hebrews. My Papacito tended the grounds. One day, he dug up a flat stone and brought it home. Said it will make a fine table. But then I saw a name on it. Joe Lee. I tell Papacito, ‘You disrespect the dead. Put it back.’ But Papacito said, ‘Respect is for the living.’ For years, we took tea and drank tequila on this man’s gravestone. Papacito brought death upon us. That is why he and Rafael die in the wars. He angered God by desecrating the Hebrews’ burial ground.”

“I thought Joe Lee was Chinese. L-E-E, right?”

“No, it’s L-E.”

“That’s an odd spelling.”

Mrs. Puga set the bread basket and tea cups on the third chair and peeled back the tablecloth. My fingertips traced the words “Jo” and “Le” etched into the marble slab. “Jo” was short for something—maybe Jonathan or Joseph. I sensed the faintest outline of a letter far beyond the “e” in “Le.” Maybe an “m” or an “n.”

As I puzzled over the name, a frigid breeze smacked the back of my neck. My extremities bristled with a clammy electricity, and I began to shiver. I got cold inside, as though I'd swallowed an ice block, only this ice was a feeling. Regret. About what, I had no idea.

"Jo Le is here." She hugged herself for warmth.

"The ghost?"

"Si."

"But ghosts aren't..."

Someone whispered a name.

Joseph Lederman.

"Did you say that?" I asked.

"I said nothing. Maybe you hear Old Joe."

The whispers continued. The same name, over and over.

Joseph Lederman. Joseph Lederman.

I remembered a story Gramps had told me about his father, Joseph. In the 1850s, Joseph's Prussian village agreed to fund his move to California for his promise to marry the rabbi's daughter, Etta, when she came of age in two years. While waiting for Etta, Joseph fell in love with his assistant, Luz, a Mexican girl, who helped him make leather belts and chaps for the rancheros. Joseph didn't divulge his feelings because of his promise to marry Etta, which he later fulfilled. Marriage hadn't stopped Joseph from fantasizing about how he and Luz might be together, fantasies that often entailed Etta's premature death. Then Etta died for real, while giving birth to Gramps.

Years passed, and Joseph still refused to confess his feelings to Luz, because he'd wished Etta dead and he believed that, in God's eyes, he'd murdered her. Joseph fell into despair and drank heavily. When he became abusive, Gramps fled east to Brooklyn. Later, Gramps blamed Joseph for his own unhappy marriage. He said his father had infected him with regret, twisting him so badly that he couldn't

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recognize it. Gramps feared he'd done the same thing to my father.

"His name wasn't Jo Le," I said. "It was Joseph Lederman, and he was my great-grandfather."

"Ah. This is why you are familiar. This is why he speaks to you."

The whispers ceased, the chill lifted, and my skin stopped crawling.

I slid back the chair and stood. "I have to go."

"Take that with you."

She pointed toward the ice box, at a burlap flour sack imprinted with the words Golden Sheaf. I picked it up and peered inside.

"Bones?"

"Last month, the earthquake loosened a panel in back of Papacito's closet. He'd hidden them there, probably the day he brought home your great-grandfather's gravestone. This is why Joe haunts us. His spirit is chained to those bones."

"How'd that happen?"

"Unfinished business. You must finish it for him."

"How?"

Mrs. Puga didn't answer. She shuffled to her bedroom and closed the door behind her.

I stepped outside and threw the sack over my shoulder. The contents rattled and clanked against my back like a broken xylophone. I was supposed to meet with three other families Uncle Rahm wanted evicted. Screw that. Come Monday, I'd look for another job.

#

The Metro-Lines clerk who'd sold me the bus tickets neglected to mention that the \$1.80 in fare came with complimentary crackpots for company. My seatmates on the return trip to Bel Air included a gamey woman with a box of chinchillas, a whiny kid having a temper tantrum over a lost lollipop, and a three-hundred-pound man who

continuously rocked his body while rubbing his hands and humming off key. Not that a soon-to-be unemployed lawyer with a foul ball and a sack of bones to his name had any right to judge.

I stepped off at Sunset Boulevard and made the arduous slog up Nimes Rd. to Virginia's house. A slick-looking fellow in pleated pants, pointy leather shoes, and a fitted T-shirt greeted me at the door. He introduced himself as Romeo. He was wearing a fedora covered in foil, which was weird, but I didn't say anything. He eyed my flour sack curiously and didn't ask about it. I guess that made us even.

The house was spacious and open. No walls separated the kitchen, dining, and living areas. The rear façade was glass and opened to a full-length balcony overlooking the city. Guests chatted, drank, and stuffed their faces while milling around the living room's massive, angled stone fireplace. Firelight glinted off the dining room table because the plates, bowls, and cups had been molded from foil, as had the sculptures of gunslingers and horses serving as centerpieces. The guests were reflective in their foil neckties, pant cuffs, earrings, and the like.

What the hell?

A guy in a sheen gabardine suit, foil bowtie, foil kitchen apron, and foil-wrapped wingtip shoes leaned against the hearth while gesticulating animatedly with a spatula. He had red hair and a long, know-it-all face. A real Ivy Leaguer. Best guess, that was Raymond. Gray-haired men with stogies patted him on the back, while a lunk in a foil ten-gallon hat, foil chaps, and metallic gun holster nursed a whiskey. I recognized him from that NBC western, where he played a brooding oaf named Hogwash. I was a Gunsmoke fan myself.

Romeo tore off a long sheet of aluminum foil and explained the party had a foil theme in honor of Kaiser Aluminum, the new sponsor for Old West Theater, which Raymond produced. He told

me to fashion a tie, a hat, a belt, whatever I preferred. My fingers were so cramped from holding the sack, I could manage a tiny, disk-shaped hat that made me look like Flash Gordon's rabbi.

I spotted Virginia in a shimmery dress that reflected rainbows whenever she made the slightest move. She was talking to a short, dark-haired woman and nibbling on a stalk of cream cheese-filled celery. I dove into the crowd and hovered behind her, waiting for a break in the conversation.

"I'm serious, Hattie," said Virginia. "It's happening soon."

"Yeah? When?"

"Tonight. I'm fed up with Raymond."

"That's swell. I'm proud of you," she said flatly.

"I'm totally serious."

"I'm sure you are."

"You don't believe me."

"Come on, Virg. We've had this conversation a thousand times. You never go through with it."

"You're right," said Virginia, defeated. "I'm a coward."

"Maybe you should stay with Raymond."

"Spare me, Hattie. No Devil's Advocate. Not now."

"Raymond's a good provider. He doesn't hit you."

"Seriously. Stop."

"He's handsome in a Rock Hudson way—well, if Rock Hudson was a ginger. He's got exquisite taste in clothes and wine."

"Stop, Hattie!"

"He cooks. He's fastidiously clean. What wife wouldn't die for such a husband?"

"He's an uptight control freak and totally incapable of loving me or any other woman."

"Love was never part of your arrangement."

"I haven't reaped a stinking cent from this fake marriage. Raymond

hasn't sent any studio business my way. I'm earning slave wages for Esmay. Meanwhile, he pays Romeo fifty for Lord knows what."

"You know very well what Romeo does for Raymond."

"Don't remind me."

Hattie plucked a Champagne flute from a waiter's tray and offered it to Virginia, who waved it off.

"Are you enabling me?"

"Someone has to, Virg. Kicking the bottle was only the first step. I'm gonna mingle."

Virginia tracked Hattie across the room until she met my eyes. In the split second before registering my presence, Virginia had a facial expression that made me think of the worn, sun-beaten leather scraps Gramps used to pile near his workshop window. Not even the most gifted tanner could resuscitate them, he'd said. It the face of despair.

"Well, if it isn't How-Howard." My new nickname, apparently. She planted a kiss on my cheek, then backed away to size me up. She ran a fingernail around the points of my checkered shirt collar and stroked my tie. "Interesting combination."

I caught the reflection of my ensemble in the curio cabinet behind her. Good Lord. With a squeaky, red nose and suspenders, I could've passed for a rodeo clown.

Virginia reached toward something in my hair. "Sagebrush?"

"Heh. Yeah. Took a little tumble."

As she tugged, the twig raked my scalp, shooting goosebumps to my toes.

"That's better. No. What's this?" She peeled a stuck lollipop from my coat's side vent. "Did you tumble into a candy factory?"

"From my bus ride."

"What's in the sack?"

"Oh, uh, work-related."

Virginia fiddled with her wrist cuffs fashioned from the hide of a

baseball. I touched one and allowed my fingertips to graze her skin.

“So soft. You tawed it with alum, right?”

Her eyes sparkled. “Exactly.”

“My grandfather tawed my baseball glove. I was the only kid on the diamond with a white glove, but I didn’t mind because it was so darn soft. I could field anything, even the line drives.”

Virginia turned abruptly toward the kitchen, panicked. “Oh God. The garlic toast’s burning. Excuse me.”

Raymond opened a kitchen window and fanned the smoke with an oven mitt. “Christ, Virginia!” he yelled. “You ruined the whole batch. Where are we supposed to get more garlic at this hour?”

The guests quieted and turned toward Raymond’s furious voice. Virginia looked mortified, like she wished she could dive into her headband with that miniature, shirtless cowboy.

“What the hell are you good for?” Raymond fumed.

“Maybe you should cool it,” I suggested.

“Who the hell are you?” he asked through a Tom-Collins-clouded gaze.

“This is Howard,” said Virginia. “He’s the one who gave up the Purple Stripe.”

“Unless you have more in that bag of yours, butt out.”

“Gladly, once you start treating Virginia with respect.”

“Forget it, Howard,” she pleaded.

“And what if I don’t?” Raymond asked.

The actor who played Hogwash ambled into the kitchen. By the looks of his glazed eyes and uncertain gait, he wasn’t too far behind Raymond in the inebriation department.

Raymond sidled up to Hogwash and leered at me. “I asked, ‘And what if I don’t?’”

“Well... you might regret it.”

“Did you know Hogwash here’s my bodyguard? Am I right, Hogwash?”

Hogwash contorted his face. He was either confused or his foil undies were riding up his ass.

“Am I right?” Raymond pressed. “As the man who signs your checks? As the man who decides whether you survive episode twenty-one’s shootout with the Oakley clan?”

Hogwash unscrewed his face, squared his shoulders, and then flexed his hand over his holster. I didn’t know whether his gun was real, let alone loaded, but my odds of surviving a fistfight with this six-foot-five, three-hundred-pound goliath were far closer to none than slim.

Raymond crossed his arms, emboldened. “Now what do you have to say, Howard?”

Virginia shook her head, indicating she wanted me to drop it, but I’d gone too far to back down. How the hell I was gonna come out of this in one piece? Not through brute force, that was for sure. This required guile and chutzpah. Something worthy of Gunsmoke.

I took a deep breath and imagined a tin star pinned to my chest. I mustered my best Marshal Dillon impersonation, and let the words flow out of me like torrential rain down a dry, dusty gulch. “Men die for lots of reasons. Like the fella who’s willing to fight for something bigger, even though he don’t stand the chance of a snail in a horse race. But he’s a different breed than you Hollywood trash. Your kind’s willing to kill for a fool’s reason. For burnt garlic toast. I should warn you, Hogwash. Though I don’t look like a fighter, you should know what’s in this sack here.” I rattled the bag for dramatic effect. “Bones, big fella. Bones from all my victims. And the thing is, I didn’t lift a finger to get ’em. Nope. I put the fear of God in them so bad, the flesh just slid right off their skeletons.”

Hogwash stepped close, his gaping nostrils expelling humid, whiskey breath. This wasn’t good. I envisioned my future face— anemic, toothless, and concave, like a partially-deflated basketball left exposed to the elements.

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Fortunately, Fate had other plans for my goofy mug.

Hogwash burst into high-pitched laughter and then said, “Jolly good impression, old chap.” He sounded just like David Niven. I kid you not. “Is he joining the cast?” he asked Raymond.

“Romeo!” Raymond called out, humiliated.

Romeo rushed into the kitchen. “Señor Raymond?”

“How much garlic toast is left out there?”

“Two baskets.”

Raymond moaned. “That’ll only get us through the next hour.”

“It is all right, Señor Raymond. My mother has more garlic than she could eat in her lifetime.”

“It’s twenty miles to Chavez Ravine.”

“True, Señor Raymond, and the jalopy is very slow. Perhaps, if I drive Andrew...”

“Only I drive the Corvette,” Raymond seethed.

The guy had named his Corvette Andrew. That pretty much said it all.

“Take Señora Virginia’s Plymouth,” said Raymond. “When you return, do not let that woman anywhere near the garlic.” He turned to me with a cheap, tin-foil smile and his hands spread wide in a mea culpa gesture. “Howard. Please forgive my behavior. Just abominable. Let me make it up to you. I bet you’re a scotch man.”

I checked my watch. I’d have to call for a taxi soon.

“Surely, you can spare a minute for a fifteen-year-old Glenfiddich.”

“I’m heading to the airport.” I cast a tentative eyeball at Virginia. “Turns out Esther’s coming in tonight.”

“Who’s Esther?”

“His fiancée,” Virginia said grimly.

“This definitely calls for a scotch.”

Raymond wrangled me into his study, closed the door, and poured us whiskies. His office was adorned with photos of shirtless

cowboys, a framed movie poster of Gary Cooper in High Noon, and silver revolvers with mother of pearl handles. He handed me the booze and sat me in a cowhide chair. I fell so low into the seat, my tuchas practically hit my ankles, causing the scotch to slosh all over my pants. I set the empty glass on the end table, next to a lamp whose base was a glass sculpture of a merman in a cowboy hat, the pull chord emerging from what would've been the merman's crotch, if mermen had crotches. I yanked the silky kerchief from my breast pocket and attempted to dab the moisture from my groin area, but the cheap satin had no absorbency whatsoever.

The door flung open, and Virginia darted toward Raymond, eyes blazing, as though about to sink her teeth into Raymond's jugular.

Feigning delight, Raymond asked, "Dear, the men are talking here. How about I fix you a whiskey to sip on your way out?"

"How about a divorce instead?"

Raymond scanned the alcohol decanters—as though a "divorce" was a cocktail served with a maraschino cherry and a paper umbrella. Finally, Virginia's words percolated through his pickled brain. "What?"

"I'm leaving you."

Raymond laughed. "You can't support yourself."

"I'll manage."

"I get it. You finally swallowed your pride. Rich mommy's going to bail you out."

"I have some savings and my eye on a design space. I may have to live in it as well, but it's well worth it."

Raymond scoffed. "You'll be back."

Virginia strode out. I heaved myself from the chair and rushed after her. She stopped at the hearth and fixated on the roaring flames, panting like a lioness after the kill. After I joined her side, I sensed a familiar, frigid breath on my neck and an unbearable weight digging

into my shoulder. I opened the fireplace doors and stuffed the sack inside.

“What are you doing?” asked Virginia.

“I’m un-doing.”

The burlap blackened and curled, while the bones crackled and hissed, whispering away their marrow-deep regret. I took Virginia’s hand and led her to the balcony, where I kissed her—first for Joseph, second for Gramps, third for my father, and last for myself.

I would’ve held that last smooch forever, had something not buzzed over my head. A hummingbird. Flying east. Fast.

“Looks like you’re not the only one in a hurry to get out of here,” I said.

“Raymond’s wrong. I’m not coming back.”

“I believe you.”

She rewarded my confidence in her with a kiss.

“You mind driving me to the airport?” I asked. “I need to say goodbye to Esther.”

“Sure. I’ll grab the keys to Harriet.”

“Harriet?”

“The jalopy. You’re gonna love her.”

“Really? Why?”

“She’s just your type. Reliable. Stout. Sturdy.”

I laughed. “A match made in Heaven.”

Virginia offered me her elbow. “Our Harriet awaits.”

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