

Collateral Damage

by

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Chapter 3

Every city has a sleazy section and I love that predictability. The dirt bag hotels and the creeps that run them, the winos drinking holes in their livers who sleep in downtown doorways after the Suits knock off for martinis, and the broken down Padres who run the decrepit mission buildings all have the fascination that familiarity brings.

Whenever I blow into a new town I head for the skids, like a forest ranger heads for the hills to get a breath of fresh air. That's where the real people are in America.

Anytime you want to see what's really happening in this country, visit the downtown bus station. That's where you'll see the folks who live between the people of the streets and the three-square-meals-a-day guy with a paycheck good enough to buy a television set in an oak cabinet. You've got your upper and middle class but you don't dare call these people the lower class; the sociologists won't allow it. So, since they're not homeless, they have no title, and without a name you're nothing in this country.

Almost with no exception you're looking at the people who clean up the mess the rest of us make. Unschooled, they eat the pablum the government feeds them and actually believe they have a voice in what goes on in their world. They accept what they're told because their big brother raised them to believe it. The system is created just for them, though not as advantageously as they've been led to expect. Huxley called them the "Prols," but his vision was much too kind.

Back a few years, when the country was young, they were the filthy farmers who, with bare feet, trampled the rugs of the Boston Brahmins and spread horse manure on everything they touched. Today their children work behind the counters of fast food restaurants serving bacteria-laden hunks of salty beef fat.

The prols clerk at Deep Discountland and SaveMoney Drug. They're never in a hurry and the light behind their eyes glows at a constant 25 watts. They live forever and I love them, because

like cockroaches and crab grass they'll be here when the rest of us college educated foreheads are dusted off the face of the earth.

They're real, alright. Realer than the Three-Piece Guy running for office with his right hand in yours and his left in your pocket. In L.A., they took a lesson from Boss Tweed and openly, some say brazenly, take graft while robbing the rest of us blind. "If you want to get away with murder, go to L.A.," the saying goes.

Down on the docks, the Port Authority had plans to punch a road through the city's oldest park to access their new warehouses. You should have seen the neighborhood residents fume! This road would cut through the park with four lanes designed for heavy industrial traffic. The Authority design would wipe out dozens of homes.

Half the city signed petitions to stop the project. A non-binding referendum was held and passed with over 85% approval. That was the problem though; non-binding. What the grass-roots people didn't know about was all the people from the mayor on down who were paid to grease the skids.

They say the Port Authority Director is a civil service employee but the guy they've had in there the past 20 years makes Al Capone look honest. He doesn't make enough on his \$125,000/year salary to pay for his boat, mistress, house on the cliff in Avalon and mansion on Mullholland in the Hollywood

Hills. He takes money under the table to keep the dock workers numbed and when the shippers want more of anything, "Doc" Harding knows where to direct the do-re-me.

I got to study the Director for my first article at the *Purge*. All trails eventually lead to a mover and shaker in L.A. politics by the name of Horace Dodge. Like a sewer rat, Dodge has his dirty little feet stuck into every juicy morsel in the City. One of those morsels at a large law firm put the nix on my story and I've never forgiven Dodge for that.

In the course of my research I turned up a vague tidbit linking the Senator with pedophilia. That would have been an interesting sidebar to my story but when Fred, my editor, pulled the plug, I dropped the lead.

What I like best about the Prols is they're the ones who read what I write and they love me for it. They don't want to hear about the state of the union. They don't want to hear about foreign debt. They don't want to hear about nothing. They want to know what actor is porking what actress and they want to read the junk that dribbles from the putrid excuse for a newspaper I work for.

Most of the time I make up the stuff in my column and attach some sleazy photo to it and turn it in to Fred. If he believes it, and he isn't easy to fool, it goes to press under my banner, "Man About Town."

What I do would make me sick if it wasn't so easy or if I

cared. At least I don't have any pretensions of what, or who, I am. I never said I was Hemingway.

Creating the story of Sally Van Meter was made to order for the *Weekly Purge*. Can you see this? Pretty woman with a body that would give Hugh Hefner a hard-on washes up on the beach. Interview some friends and co-workers. Dig deep for the sleaze, though you never have to dig very far in this town. My readers would lap it up.

But there's always something different to make you change your mind about yourself, isn't there? Something about this girl I couldn't get out of my thoughts. Besides, I didn't have anything else better to do. I wanted to find out the truth for once. I didn't want this girl swallowed up corruption. Razor sharp mind that I have, I headed for Mar Vista and 3598 Glendon Avenue.

All apartment buildings are designed by the same architect and the guy has no taste. The Glendon building was no exception except they had a special on red brick the week they built it. A sign, made with press-on letters over #2, said, "Manager." The second "a" was missing though, so I got to rap on the door of our Lord and Savior's birthplace. Oh, boy.

Knocking on the door brought out the littlest little old lady you ever saw. Her hair, short but curled, had a slight tint of purple. She had on a drab house dress that swept the floor. The smell of burnt bacon wafted through the air.

"Yes?" She spoke in that tight lipped way you see in young kids or people with bad teeth; like she had something in her mouth she didn't want you to see. A little rat-dog yapped at me from behind the lady. "Shut up," she said, and kicked the mutt across the room like she used to play football. It bounced against the sofa and was silent.

"This where Sally Van Meter lived, er, lives?"

"Who wants to know?" she inquired not so sweetly.

Feisty little old lady. "I do."

No response, but at least she isn't closing the door.

"Richard Garcia. Richard Garcia wants to know."

"That can't be you, young man. You don't look Mexican." She pronounced it, "Mecks-kin," like the less than politically correct do around here. "You wouldn't work for one of those people would you?"

"Those people?"

No response again. It might be time to change tactics. She began to wave the door like a pennant in a light breeze.

"No ma'am. I'm Richard Garcia."

"Do tell?" I could hear interest creeping into her voice.

"Why you got a Mexican name?"

"My parents had a sense of humor."

"Do tell? Why would a Mexican want to see Sally? She's such a sweet girl except for all those men always coming around at odd hours. Can't beat them off with a stick."

"Kind of like hounds on the tail of a fox?"

"Hmm. Do tell?"

That effectively stopped the conversation so I tried my ace in the hole. "I'm a journalist."

"Do tell?"

"For a newspaper."

She assumed an imperial look and didn't reply.

"I'm doing a story on..." and I stopped. I stopped because of something I saw in the old biddy's apartment. Mounted, in the middle of the living room, on a huge chunk of concrete and iron, was the 55 mm machine gun from an old Mitchell bomber.

"Something wrong Mr. Graces?"

"Garcia, ma'am. Garcia. You know, Blank Frank, an old friend of mine carried one of those out from the High Sierra when we were teenagers. Twenty-five miles over Kearsarge Pass. He lives in Bishop now and he still has it. Started a whole career in carrying out worthless scraps of metal from the mountains. Now he restores antique wood burning stoves."

"Hmm. Do tell?" She opened the door wider so I could get a better look at it. "It belonged to my late husband," she said in that obscure way people have of denying interest in something.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry about what?"

"Um, about your husband."

"Well, don't be," she crabbed. "He was always late. Didn't

even show up on time for his own burial and had the nerve to leave this monstrosity in the middle of the living room to boot."

"You know, ole Blank would be mighty interested in taking that hunk of iron off your hands."

"Do tell!" the biddy replied, the picture of friendliness.

After that I couldn't shut the old bag up, and in return for old Blank's address and phone number written on the back of my business card, she agreed to let me into Sally's apartment so I could wait for her to come home from work. "Not supposed to do this, you know, but seeing as you're such a respectable man, and a journalist doing a story on Sally, we can bend the rules just this once."

"Just tell Frank you know me and he'll rush right down and pick up your gun."

"Just you promise me not to steal anything. Sally usually isn't home this early in the day and she probably won't like you pawing through her stuff."

"Yes, ma'am. I won't." And I was in, like Flynn. She escorted me, her dress swishing the stairs, into Sally's apartment. She followed me around for a few minutes, pointing out a variety of dust collectors the dead girl had collected. "She got them from a boyfriend of hers." Whoever the boyfriend was, he showed a propensity for figurines and sculptures that resembled printed circuits and transistors nailed onto blobs of clay.

I picked up one, about the size of a watermelon, from the coffee table and examined it. A thin, silver wire, dangled out of it. "What is it?" I asked, rhetorically.

The old lady took the object from my hand and turned it over and over as if looking for its gonads. "Can't say that I know," she said. "Art, I guess."

I traced the wire to the kitchen where it ran into a 2 X 2 inch box screwed into the baseboard. Returning to the melon, I quickly discovered a latch, lifted the lid, and uncovered a telephone.

"Well, would you look at that!" the old lady beamed. "What'll they think of next?"

After a few more words of wonder, and another warning to not steal anything, the biddy left me to my own devices. I bit my tongue and didn't tell her Sally wouldn't be here for a long time. Best to leave that up to someone else.

The apartment was one bedroom, one bath, a living room and kitchen. Tiny but efficient. I breezed past the photos on the wall and went straight for the bedroom.

On the table beside the bed, piled around a green plastic frog, was a box of rubbers, a diaphragm and some jelly. The girl liked to play it safe. The frog turned out to be another telephone. I checked the number; only the prefix was displayed - a Santa Monica number. Odd, this area being Mar Vista, there should have been another number. You can have that done when you

change addresses, but it takes money to convince the phone company.

The answering machine showed no new messages. I played back the tape, hoping some of the old ones would be there, but no luck. Her outgoing message was simple, "Leave a message at the beep." Sally's voice sounded young, like you would expect any teen to sound.

I tried out the bed; plenty of bounce.

Next, I looked in the closet. Lots of business suits and more shoes than anyone but Imelda Marcos should have.

She devoted half of her dresser to underwear; it looked like she owned at least two of everything in the Victoria's Secret catalog. Well, no wonder. I bet it all looked good on her.

The bathroom didn't have anything special; more rubbers behind the mirror and more underwear hanging in the shower. There was no t.p. Maybe she didn't believe in it.

There was a computer in the living room set up on some milk crates and 2 X 6 slabs. I turned the beast on and continued my search. For what? I still didn't know. Is this what it's like to be an investigative reporter? You keep looking until you find something to write about and then make it into a big deal?

She had an expensive stereo system but lousy taste in music. Rap. Hip Hop. Some teen sensation I'd seen on all the porno sites. Madonna. Some names I'd never heard. No TV. Odd, I thought everyone had one these days. Nothing special in the kitchen

except for an empty refrigerator. Probably went out to eat a lot. Pretty girls, you would expect to.

The kitchen cupboards held the usual. In the drawer next to the flatware I discovered napkins, a screwdriver, packing tape, and some pamphlets for a woman's shelter in Seattle called, "Hill House." Also, a flyer for some mission called, "The Good Shepard." Can't they spell in Washington? I pocketed them.

The computer was humming along, waiting for someone to tell it what to do. I played on the keys a minute to see what she had in there and discovered a lot of garbage. I found a notebook program. It was easy to get into it, I didn't even feel guilty. After all, I told myself, she's dead and you're an investigative reporter. Funny how easy it is to justify invading someone's privacy. Even the dead deserve some respect, don't they?

As I suspected, the notebook program contained the dead girl's address book and phone numbers. Quite a list too. Hardly any women mentioned. Odd. I took a second look. Each entry had some notations that made no sense to me. She had some 3.5 diskettes on the slabs so I transferred a copy of her little black book onto disk. The printer spat out several pages of hard copy for me.

I left the beast running and cruised the rooms one last time. In the hallway I saw something that piqued my interest. A photo of Sally and the morgue doctor and someone who could have been Sally's older sister. In another picture, Sally looked

prepubescent but already budding into a beauty. She was standing with her arms around her older version and a middle-aged mom-looking woman, with a bunch of trees behind them. A very endearing family shot. Fido, the biggest Great Dane God ever saw, was lying on the ground in front of them.

I thought the ole doctor was a bit dazed and confused. No wonder there was a positive i.d. so quickly. It must be weird to see your own sister come across the table.