

STORY NUMBER 6 OF 8

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

BY JONATHAN SANTLOFER

I start feeling it in the middle of the afternoon and it gets worse by night, pictures flashing inside my head, that gnawing feeling in my gut like I'm starving, obsession building like steam under the goddamn L.A. streets, ready to blow.

I stare at the cracks in the ceiling of this lousy rooming house on Hollywood Boulevard and imagine Bugsy Siegel getting shot while he's reading the L.A. Times in his girlfriend's Beverly Hills living room, just sitting there minding his own business, and I think: No one's safe nowadays, and picture it—four bullets blasting Bugsy's head apart, one blowing his eyeball clear across the room, according to the papers, and I imagine his girlfriend, Virginia Hill, coming home from Paris, where she'd gone after she and Bugsy had one of their big fights, and finding it in a corner half under the rug, wondering at first what it is, then going all sick. I know everything there is to know about Bugsy, like his real name, Benjamin Siegelbaum, and that he's Jewish, from Brooklyn, a poor kid who made good, and I admire that, the way he had an idea to build a gambling casino in the middle of the desert and no one could stop him spending millions that he didn't have, which is what got him into trouble. The Flamingo opened last Christmas with all sorts of hoopla, in every paper, even a newsreel, movie stars like June Haver and George Raft there for the opening, though it didn't go so well on account of it not being finished and the air-conditioning in them fancy suites not working and everyone mad as hell at poor Bugsy.

Me, I would've given anything to be there, hobnobbing with movie stars and the likes of Lucky Luciano and especially Mickey Cohen, real name Meyer Harris Cohen, also Jewish and a poor kid, like Bugsy. I know all about Mickey, too, that he trained as a boxer and wasn't half bad but gave it up when he got in with Meyer Lansky, the mob's accountant, real name Major Suchowliński, again Jewish, and it got me thinking I'm a lot like those guys, starting out poor and all, with big dreams, and how I've changed my name, more than once, though I don't know if I'm Jewish because Carole never told me. She never told me anything. What she said was: You're nothing.

The sheets are rough and itchy, but I lie still, like I've been taught, and picture that I save Bugsy from the hit and he repays me by making me his number one, like Johnny Stompanato is to Mickey Cohen; Johnny, who dates movie stars and gets me a date with Ava Gardner, and I see us, me and Ava, in front of Grauman's Chinese, lights crisscrossing the air, big horde pointing, oohing and aahing, and Carole's in the crowd, a ghost, watching, filled with envy; Carole, who wanted to be a famous movie star so bad, which never happened. But I'm not like her. I'm already famous, it's just that people don't know it, not yet. But soon.

Some neon sign is driving me crazy, lighting up my window every other second bluish-white, and I stop thinking about Bugsy and Mickey and think about Myrna, skin so pale and white the veins showed through, giving it a bluish cast, and the way she cried and begged and how I told her to think about something else, how that had always worked for me, and I got so good at it I'd be surprised when I came back to real life and the men were gone and Carole was snoring beside me, and how I'd find a bruise the next day or dried blood on my lip where one of the guys had hit me and I hadn't even felt it, and I wanted that for Myrna, and the others, too. I'm not a monster. I'd say, Think about your favorite picture star, Gary Cooper or Claudette Colbert, and in my mind I'd see all the pictures I'd stored and the ones Carole had cut out of Photoplay and Modern Screen, photographs of Ginger Rogers and Jean Harlow and Lana Turner and Carole Lombard, who she claims she was named after, all bottle blonds like Carole, covering the walls of our crummy apartment. She'd say, You know, Lana was discovered at Schwab's drugstore, just sitting there at the counter in her tight sweater, and she'd pull on a sweater and stick her chest out and study herself in the mirror, drawing red lipstick above her thin upper lip, and ask me, How do I look? Like Lana, huh? And I'd say, Better, and she'd give me one of her rare smiles.

Sometimes Carole would sneak me into a picture show and leave me there all day and I'd sit through It Happened One Night seven or eight times until I could recite the lines along with Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert, and even now I can hear the dialogue and see that picture in my mind and freeze it when Claudette Colbert raises her skirt to hitch a ride and sometimes, when I'm feeling bad, I do that and it lifts my spirits. I saw lots of pictures that way, King Kong, which made me cry, and The Invisible Man, who I wish I could be and maybe I am. Sometimes,

Carole would forget to come back for me and my eyes would blur, imagining my hands on Barbara Stanwyck's neck or Mae West's rear end, and next thing I knew the matron was rapping my feet and telling me to scram and I'd walk home in the dark with all those pictures flickering in my head and I'd imagine doing all sorts of things, like kissing Veronica Lake or just lying next to Loretta Young telling her all sorts of things, secrets I'd never tell anyone else, and knowing she'd listen and pat my head, and say, There, there, and those were my favorite days, my best days.

When I finish counting the cracks in the ceiling I start counting all the girls, but after nine, Mildred or Mabel, I can't keep their names straight. Names can be confusing, like mine, which is John, I think, though when I learned to write, Carole said it was Jon without an h, or maybe James, and when I asked her which one, she said, Who cares?

I try to picture the girls' faces but they've started to blur and it's like maybe I made them up or dreamed them, or maybe the made-up part is me, lying here in this bed, you know what I mean?

I run my hands along my arms and they feel solid enough but I'm still not sure so I sit up and stare at my reflection in the mirror at the end of the bed and I see some regular-looking Joe, dark hair shiny with Brylcreem, sticking up, and I remember how Carole would never let me cut it, how it got long and wavy like a girl's, and I try to smooth it down but it pops up and I think, John the scarecrow, that's me, or Jon without an h, or James, and then I'm thinking about Carole bringing home some old guy who wasn't so interested in her, and she'd say How about the kid? And he'd say, Is it a girl or a boy? And she'd say, What do you want it to be? and I'd lie there pretending to sleep, curled up tight as could be, and sometimes the guys would hit me because I wasn't a girl or because they just felt like hitting me, and if I cried Carole would hit me, too, and tell me to shut up, so I learned to be still and replay the last episode of The Shadow in my mind or just listen to Carole humming "Life Is Just a Bowl of Cherries" really loud until they finished.

I stop looking in the mirror and lie back but it's like ants are crawling all over me, I've got the heebie-jeebies so bad. The papers say hot winds are blowing out of the Great Basin all the way from Nevada to California, making people crazy, but that isn't it: the pictures in my head won't stop, and I know it's too late and I'll never get relief.

I look around the room, no better than the place in Mission Junction, which I had to leave because the police came around asking my landlady questions about me. Luckily, she liked me, they all do, the women, I mean, but the cops had found the girl, Mabel or Mildred, so it was time to get going, like the other times and other places. Now I'm wondering if coming back to L.A. was such a good idea, but it had called to me like Western Union. Funny, right? But it was really like that, like I heard it calling: Come back to L.A. Maybe 'cause it's my birthplace. Carole said I was conceived with a sailor right under the Hollywood sign, another time she said it was in Griffith Park with a soldier, and then in Silver Lake with a car mechanic, who smelled like gasoline and grease, but it's all L.A., right, except for our landlord, in Vernon, who Carole said

she paid off in trade starting a year before I was born, so it could've been him. We lived there till I was six or seven or eight, depending on what year Carole said I was born, 1916 or '17 or '18, but I don't remember the landlord, only the stench from the nearby meatpacking plants. After Vernon, we moved to Cudahy, which had even more meatpacking plants and the same bad smell, like the stink was following me.

I push the shade aside and look down onto Hollywood Boulevard, see a colored man leaning against a shiny new Kaiser puffing on a cigarette and blowing smoke rings, then a white girl, no more than fifteen, with a painted face, comes by and hands him a stack of bills and he stuffs them into his pocket and I think about Carole's painted face and marcel waves and penciled eyebrows and red lips, and all the others just like her, and the one from the other night, at the hotel where I man the front desk and carry bags up to rooms and fix the plumbing when it goes on the fritz, which is more often than not, a regular jack-of-all-trades, that's me, another name to add to my list.

The one thing I know is how to talk to women, especially the unhappy ones, the ones who are sick to death of their husbands and their miserable lives, the ones who've packed their bags and left, who drink too much and wear their rayon skirts too tight and who stink of cheap perfume, just like that dame who checked in two nights ago, Mary something-or-other, who I'd pegged at forty-something, though she claimed to be thirty, gammin' for me, acting all Fifth Avenue when she was anything but, complaining about this and that, like the world owed her a living, while I lugged her bag up three flights, doing my best Bing Crosby, nodding and smiling, I know, I know, and her showing off how she worked at the May Company department store selling dresses and how she knows everything about fashion, something called the New Look, and me saying, That's swell, nodding and smiling till my face hurt and then, later, she's down-stairs again, bending my ear and crying on my shoulder and I'm all sympathy till some sailor comes in, twenty-one, twenty-two, and she stops talking to me just like that and starts laughing it up with the kid and next thing I know they go off arm in arm and she doesn't so much as give me a second glance or bother to say good night, but two hours later she's back after dumping the sailor, or more likely he dumped her, staggering on her open-toed pumps all drunk and teary and wants to talk again, and my shift's about to end so I say, How about a cup of coffee? and she says, That'd be swell, and I say there's an all-night diner up on Mulholland and we get into my beat-up Dodge coupe and I drive to a deserted lover's lane, and when I pull to a stop, she asks, Where the hell are we? but I don't say anything, just lean over to kiss her and she slaps me across the face and I think, that's it for her. I punch her and her head hits the side window so hard I think it's going to break the glass but the only thing that breaks is her head, blood all over my goddamn window and upholstery, and I leave her there a minute, get out of the car and come around and open her door and she slumps out, moaning, and I drag her across the field by her arms and she's kicking and scratching, crying and stuttering, N-no—p-please—no, but all I'm

seeing is Carole tucking bills inside her brassiere and hands coming over my face and covering my mouth and the smell of old man whiskey breath while my fingers tighten around her neck.

When I stop, she's lying still and I'm out of breath and have to sit on the damp ground for a minute and I look at her face, all purple and bloated, and I don't feel so good anymore. I thought that would do it, calm my urges, but here they are again, begging to be fed sooner than expected, like someone has wound my muscles and nerves too tight and my head is pounding and there's only one way to get relief.

I pace back and forth in my room feeling sad and mad and disgusted because I'd planned to start over in L.A., have a new life, but it's just the same old thing.

The sun finally comes up orange and soft under the smog and I go down the hall to the bathroom, take a leak, cover my mug with Barbasol, use my finger to create an ear-to-ear grin, careful not to nick myself while I shave. Afterward, I splash on Skin Bracer and rub more Brylcreem into my hair and use my comb to make a perfect part, and think, John or Jon or Jamey, you look pretty darn good, and I feel better, too, almost calm, like maybe everything's going to be okay after all. I put on a clean shirt and a tie and go downstairs whistling "Life Is Just a Bowl of Cherries," head west on Hollywood Boulevard, the air warm and a little thick, until I reach North Cherokee and see the pale green sign for Musso & Frank Grill.

Inside, still feeling good, I order my favorite breakfast—flannel cakes, the Musso & Frank version of pancakes—which is the cat's meow. I sip black coffee and open the L.A. Times, read all about President Truman trying to stop communism and the United Nations voting to create a place just for Jews who suffered so bad during the war, then I turn a page and there it is in big bold letters: LOVER'S LANE MURDER. I skim the article, heart thumping like there's a rabbit inside my chest, not sure what I'm looking for, my name? Maybe. Both wanting to see it and dreading that I will. I'm just reading how the police have booked the dame's husband on suspicion of her murder when the waitress brings my pancakes and I practically jump out of my seat.

"Honey," she says. "You'd better lay off the coffee," and smiles, lipstick creeping into the sides of her mouth, and I picture Carole's lips but manage to smile back and say, "Hi-de-ho," and she pivots on her low-heeled waitress shoes and I smother my flannel cakes with syrup and drink two more cups of coffee, in no hurry to get moving, the day yawning in front of me with nothing to do till my shift at the hotel and I feel okay now, my nerves under control.

The waitress comes back with my check and I accidentally-on-purpose brush my fingertips against hers, read her name off her ID, and say, "So, you must be new here, Lorraine." And she says, "Second day." And I say, "Lemme guess, you're an actress," and she slides her hand up the back of her neck, pats her French twist, smiles again, and says, "Tryin' to be." And I say, "I know it's rough, but you'll make it, kid," thinking she's pushing thirty and her kid days are numbered. And she says, "Gee, thanks, mister," and I feel disappointed because that "mister" part makes

me feel old but I don't let it bother to me too much. I ask, "When do you get off?" And she says, "Oh, today I'm leaving at four because I got an audition at Warner Bros.," and she beams. "It's just a walk-on, but you never know, right?" and pats her hair again. I say, "Right. So maybe I could pick you up later." And she frowns and says, "I don't think my boyfriend would like that." And I say, "Neither would my girlfriend!" And we both laugh, but she's already turned away and I'm thinking she's not really my type, a bit too cheerful, and I'm about to go back to my paper when two guys come in, a big handsome galoot I recognize right away as Johnny Stompanato, and the guy with him, none other than Mickey Cohen! I seen his picture dozens of times but he doesn't look as glamorous in person, smaller, closer to my size, and I can't stop staring at him, his dark eyes and dark eyebrows beneath a felt fedora and a wide silk tie with a turtle-and-fish design that must've set him back six, seven bucks easy, and my heart's thumping again as they slide into the booth opposite mine and Lorraine pours them each a cup of coffee, posing while she does, hand on her hip, and me gaping.

Hey, Mickey, you don't know me, not yet, but I know everything about you—your mother, Fanny, your three brothers, your first boxing match on April 8, 1930, and your last one on May 14, 1933, the fact that you ran gambling for Al Capone in Chicago, and I can't tell you how sorry I am to hear about your pal Bugsy, but I was thinking I could help out, I mean now that you're short a man at the Flamingo, work reception, you know, I got the experience, or whatever else you need, I'm your man—

All of this going through my mind as I continue to stare at Mickey over the rim of my coffee cup, totally lost in thought, when Mickey says, "What the hell are you looking at?" and I snap to and say, "Me? Nothing," though I want to hold the newspaper up, point to the headline, and say, That's me, I'm the guy who did it! but Mickey is giving me a cold hard stare, and Johnny Stompanato is giving me an even colder one, so I look away, fumble a few coins out of my pocket, and drop them on the table, trying hard not to let my hands shake.

Out on the street I'm thinking Mickey was just testing me, seeing if I could take it, that he's going to be getting back to me soon, and I picture myself behind a mahogany reception desk at the Flamingo, chatting up movie stars and gangsters, everyone laughing and saying what a swell guy I am, and I start feeling good again. Before long, I'm behind the reception desk at the hotel, moving dust around with a dirty rag, when these two cops come in and start asking me about the dame who worked at the May Company department store and I give them an innocent look and keep mopping the counter, real casual, and they say something about finding a matchbook with the hotel's name at the scene of the crime, but I don't flinch, I just tell them how she checked in and got drunk and left with some sailor, keeping my voice real quiet and they seem to buy it and I think for a minute that I'm telling the truth, that maybe I didn't kill her after all, that it was the sailor or another guy or maybe even her husband, that it was just a bad dream I had about strangling her till I heard a bone

crack deep inside her throat, and I lead the two cops up to her room on the third floor and tell them I'll be downstairs if they need me and ten minutes later they're back, and the young cop, a hotshot all-American type, asks me what time the dame checked in and I turn the register book around for him and point out her signature and he asks if she said anything important and I say, "Like what?" and he gives me a long hard stare and for a minute I think the words are going to fall out of my mouth—It was me! I did it! I'm your man! I want to say it so bad because it's time that I was famous, but I keep my yap shut and wipe the counter over and over till it's so shiny I can see my regular-Joe face staring back at me, but it doesn't look familiar.

The cops walk around the hotel lobby whispering the whole time I'm busy rearranging keys on hooks that don't need no rearranging, and then the young one, Mr. All-American, looks at me again and this time I offer him a smile, nothing special, though I freeze it on my face and Carole's last smile comes into my mind like I just opened a bottle and a goddamn genie popped out.

Carole, I say, my hands on her throat, gimme a smile, but she just looks at me like she always does, like I was nothing, and I ask, Where was I born? Who am I? What's my name? and she sneers and says, Who cares? and I say, I'm John, right? and she says in a singsong voice, Or Jack or James or Jake or—and then I'm pleading, Carole—Mom—please—and she says, You can't prove that I'm your fucking mother—maybe I just took you in 'cause I pitied you—and I tighten my grip on her neck just like I will with all the other girls and I can't stop squeezing. Afterward I cut her up, body in half, then in pieces, arms, legs, torso, then wrap all of it up in a sack like it was a filleted animal and dump it into one of the trash bins outside the Cudahy meatpacking plant, already half filled with bones and guts, and I never heard another word about it, no news story, no nothing, no one missing Carole.

I'm still looking at the young cop and thinking maybe I'll make him famous, give him a lead, a tip, that there's this guy, John or Jon without an h or James, who's connected to this murder and a whole lot more, but I don't say anything and who knows, maybe I'm lying, maybe there is no John or Jon or James, no tortured boy for you to feel sorry for, no mother named for the actress Carole Lombard, only some guy, some regular Joe without a name, just a monster.