

“Say,” said Darla, “where’d you get that cupcake?”

“They’re on that table,” I said. “Over there.”

“I love cupcakes.”

“Want me to get you one?”

“No, honey, I’ll get it. Oops!” Somebody bumped up against her, and she sloshed some of her drink on the sleeve of my coat. She brushed at my sleeve with her hand.

“Sorry, Danny.”

“That’s okay.”

She was pretty plastered. She was wearing a slinky gold lamé gown with gold high heels. She had soft wavy gold hair. She was a singer that didn’t sing anymore. “His eyes?” she said, whispery, like it was a secret.

“Whose eyes?”

“You know. *His*.”

“What about them?”

“Last night I had a dream about them.”

“What did you dream?”

“That I put them out. With sewing scissors. Because I couldn’t stand them anymore. I couldn’t stand the way they looked at me.”

“Why would you have a dream like that?”

“Geez. I can’t imagine.”

I had a thought, and I started to say something, but then the thought started to slip away, it was like a helium balloon a kid was holding by a string and then he let the string go, and I watched it float away into the blue.

Darla drifted off into the crowd. The way her gown was, her back was naked nearly all the way down to her butt, and I watched her shoulder blades and her backbone moving under her skin.

We were at a party at Bud Seitz's house. The place was packed to the gills. It was a chilly night in mid April, but the house was hot. It smelled like sweat, smoke, booze, and perfume. Everybody was talking and laughing like it was a contest to see who could talk and laugh the loudest. On the phonograph was a song that I'd never heard before:

*"Something strange happened to me,
Lost my heart so suddenly,
Suddenly I found myself in a dream ..."*

The new mayor's brother, Joe Shaw, was there. Several cops, including Jack Otay, head of the Gangster Squad. The head of the Police Commission, a short fat bald guy named Nuffer. John Hobbs, a newspaper reporter. Arnold Dublinski, Bud's lawyer—Blinky people called him. Plenty of girls—starlets, dancers, extras, waitresses, manicurists, shopgirls, cigarette girls, hatcheck girls, switchboard girls, and half a dozen out and out whores. And some of Bud's guys, the guys that were in the coziest with him: Teddy Bump. Tommy and Goodlooking Tommy. Nucky Williams. Nello Marlini. Dick Prettie. And me.

I finished eating my cupcake, licked some frosting off my fingers. Doc Travis moved past me, walking on his knuckles. He grinned at me and smacked his lips.

I made my way over to the bar. The bartender was a tall blond Russian named Anatoly, who was also Bud's butler.

“Another scotch, please, Anatoly.”

“Of course.”

Anatoly was wearing a white shirt and pants and a red velvet vest. He had two fingers missing from his right hand. I'd heard he'd been this rich count in Russia and got his fingers shot off when he was fighting in the Revolution against the Communists.

“Were you really a count?”

He shrugged. “Past is past. In America, no one cares about past. I am trying to be good American now, Danny.”

“I care about the past.” I took a solemn sip of my scotch, as though toasting the past, then somebody slapped me on the back.

It was Police Commissioner Nuffer.

“What's the good word, Danny?”

“I can't think of one.”

Nuffer laughed like I'd made a hell of a joke and slapped me on the back again.

His double-breasted suit was like a sausage casing that could barely contain its contents. Anatoly gave him another drink. He took a gulp of it. His face was red and sweaty, and he looked like a man with a fever.

Bud had told me last week I wasn't acting friendly enough to his friends, so I made an effort with Nuffer.

“So how are you doing these days, Mr. Nuffer?”

“Hanging in there, my boy, hanging in there, as the condemned man said on his way to the gallows.” Nuffer's eyes narrowed as he looked around the room. “Quite a shindig tonight. Your boss knows how to throw 'em. What do you think the odds are of my getting laid? Mm, look at that tasty-looking young lady on Lieutenant Otay's arm. Jack! Jack! Join us!”

Jack Otay came over with a big-busted redhead in an orange dress. Nuffer was about eye-level with her chest, which seemed to suit him just fine. “Please introduce us, Jack.”

“Well, this here’s Clover, I believe,” said Otay. “Or was it Daisy?”

“*Violet*,” said the girl. “Violet Gilbertson. Pleased to meet ya.”

“Pleased to meet *you*, Miss Gilbertson. I’m Wendell Nuffer.”

“No kidding. My daddy’s name is Wendell.”

“And I’ll bet you’re a daddy’s girl, Miss Gilbertson.”

Violet smiled down at Nuffer; it looked like she’d used about half a tube of lipstick on her mouth. “Definitely. And you can call me Violet.”

“I hope I have a chance to call you Violet many, many more times tonight.”

“Well you never know,” she said coyly, swaying a couple inches closer to Nuffer’s flushed face, and then she looked me over. “You got a name?”

“You mean you don’t know who you’re talking to?” said Otay. A cigarette dangled out of his smirking mouth. He had a big square-jawed head that was handsome in an ugly way, or maybe vice versa. I’d heard that he was an expert in the third degree—that he had a special pair of pigskin gloves that he put on whenever he was about to work somebody over.

“This here’s Danny Landon,” continued Otay. “Two Gun Danny Landon.”

“He’s practically famous,” said Nuffer. He and Otay exchanged a look. “In certain circles.”

“Famous! Gosh, Danny,” said Violet, nearly smacking Nuffer in the face with her breasts as she swung them around toward me, “I’m sorry I didn’t know who you were. See, I ain’t lived here very long, so I don’t know who everyone is yet.”

“Where did you come here from?” asked Nuffer.

“Iowa. I was Miss Iowa Pork Queen of 1933.”

“You don’t say.”

“Yeah, when I won that I thought, Violet, your luck is finally changing, and I decided it was a good time to leave Iowa.”

“It’s probably always a good time to leave Iowa,” Otay said, and then we all heard a lot of screaming and crashing around and commotion in the next room. Everybody went rushing out to see what was up.

I saw Darla stumbling up the stairs; she was crying and her arm was bleeding and she had blood all over her gold gown. Bud Seitz and Dick Prettie were hurrying up the stairs to help her.

Nello Marlini was standing next to me and I asked him what happened. “Darla was eating a cupcake and Doc Travis tried getting it but she wouldn’t let him have it. Then he bit her on the arm and then Goodlooking Tommy started kicking the hell outa Doc and Doc ran off screaming his fucking head off.”

Bud had seen *Tarzan the Ape Man* and decided he wanted a chimp like Cheetah and that’s who Doc Travis was. He called him Doc Travis because supposedly he looked like this old bootlegger friend of his who had that name. The human Doc Travis had a cabin in the woods on Lake Arrowhead, and he disappeared completely in 1929 except for his head which was found floating in the lake.

I had spent a lot of time with Doc (the chimp). We’d sit in the sun together out by Bud’s swimming pool. He liked to comb through my hair with his fingers, I don’t know what he was looking for, fleas or lice or dandruff, and sometimes he’d find something and put it in his mouth. He seemed fascinated by my dent. I have a dent on the right side of my head. He’d gently touch it with his big black fingers, trace its route about an inch and a half up my forehead and then into my hairline where it goes under my hair about three inches and all the time he’d be making these soft cooing noises. I’d always found Doc to be affectionate, humorous, and good-natured, and never known him to bite anybody.

A tit poked me in the arm and I looked over and there was Violet. Except I got mixed up about her name and said: “Hello, Clover.”

“My name ain’t Clover damn it. So what are you famous for? How come they call you Two Gun Danny?”

But before I could answer Dick Prettie came walking back down the stairs and came over to me. “Gotta talk to you, kid,” he said, pulling me away from Violet.

“Bud wants us to take care of Doc.”

“What do you mean take care of him?”

“You know what I mean.” He saw the look on my face. “Lookit, I like the monkey too. But orders is orders.”

We started walking through the house looking for Doc. Bud had declared the party over so everybody was leaving; out front I could hear car doors slamming and engines starting up. “How’s Darla?” I said to Dick.

“They’re sending for the doctor. But she’s all right.”

“You know how strong Doc Travis is. If he’d really wanted to hurt her, he could’ve ripped her arm right outa the socket.”

Dick sighed, like he was bone-tired. “Yeah, I know.” He was wearing a brown suit and a tie with yellow flowers on it. The suit looked too big on him. Suits usually looked too big on him, since he was the skinniest guy I’ve ever seen that wasn’t dying of something. Even his moustache was just this skinny little brown line.

“I wonder why he bit Darla,” I said. “He likes Darla.”

“I heard Tommy and Goodlooking Tommy got him drunk.”

“Drunk?”

“Yeah. They was giving him bottles of beer all night. Beers and monkeys don’t mix, I guess.”

We found him in the billiard room. It had red carpet and gold walls and paintings of half-naked French women. Doc was sitting up on the pool table rolling balls around,

making them bump against each other. He looked up as we walked in then went back to rolling around the balls. He acted like we weren't even there. I think he knew he was in trouble.

We stood by the table staring at him.

"What are we supposed to do?" I said. "Take him out in the desert?" Because if we were supposed to take him out in the desert we could just let him loose or give him to somebody and Bud would never be the wiser.

"Nah. We gotta take him out in the back. Bud wants to watch."

The seven went rolling into the twelve which bumped against the three.

"We don't have to do this," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"You and me and Doc—we could just walk outa here, get in my car, and start driving."

"Yeah? And which way we gonna drive?"

"Well, we go west we hit the ocean. So I figure we head east."

"Danny, even if I was nuts enough to risk my life for a fucking monkey, how far do you think we'd get? You don't just drive away from Bud Seitz and that's the end of it. And another thing. Where's your sense of fucking gratitude? Bud's took real good care of you ever since you got hit in the head. You'd be selling apples on a street corner if it wasn't for him. And you know I ain't saying that to hurt your feelings."

"Yeah. Yeah, I know."

I stood there a minute and thought about things; then I started walking toward the door.

"Danny, where you going?" Dick sounded worried.

"I'm coming back."

I went in the party room, went over to the table where the cupcakes were. I took one and wrapped it in a napkin and put it in the side pocket of my coat.

I went back in the billiard room. Doc was still playing around with the balls.

“You were bad, Doc,” I said. “Real bad.”

Doc looked over at me. He whimpered and twisted his lips around on his teeth. I held my hand out and then he leapt into my arms.

“Let’s go for a little walk, Doc.”

I walked out of the house carrying Doc, with Dick walking behind us. I said softly into Doc’s ear: “Did Goodlooking Tommy kick you? One of these day’s I’m gonna kick Goodlooking Tommy.” Doc had this strong musky smell I liked; I always liked the way animals smelled even when it was kind of bad like a dirty dog that had been rained on but I didn’t always like the way people smelled.

When we got outside I put Doc down. Bud had a big two-story Spanish house with tall palm trees all around it. It was set on a lot of property; there was a swimming pool and a pool house and a tennis court and then a garden with all sorts of plants and flowers and thick green grass and everything was surrounded by a tall stone wall that had barbed wire spiraling along the top of it.

I held Doc’s hand and we walked out into the night. It was cold enough that our breath was making clouds. I could hear Dick behind us coughing every now and then; he coughed a lot because he smoked one cigarette after another. The swimming pool had lights under the water and was blue and still and frozen-looking. Bud had had sand hauled in to make a beach around the pool. The beach had its own seagull, tethered to a big rock by a ten-foot length of cord tied to its leg. The seagull seemed asleep.

We walked on past the tennis court and then out on the grass and among the flowers.

“Let’s stop here,” said Dick.

I looked back at the house. On a second-floor balcony, silhouetted against the light from his bedroom, Bud Seitz was standing. He was like a shape cut out of a sheet of black paper. I could see the burning tip of his cigar.

“I’ll do it,” Dick said.

A breeze was blowing in the tops of the palm trees and they were making rustling sounds and moving against the clear, brightly starred sky. Doc was looking up at me, waiting patiently, on his best behavior now, wondering what I was up to.

I squatted down beside him and said: “Look what I got for *you*.” He watched me as I took the cupcake out of my pocket and unwrapped it from the napkin then he took it from me eagerly and started to eat it. He was making little happy grunts. He had a real sweet tooth.

I looked up at Dick, standing a step or two behind Doc. He looked like he was about to be sick. He took out his .32 revolver from under his coat. I stood up and took a step back. Dick leaned over and put the barrel of the gun a few inches from the back of Doc’s head. Then the gun sputtered orange light and Doc pitched forward facedown onto the grass.

He wasn’t quite dead yet. I saw his hands pulling at the grass. And then Dick leaned down and finished him off.

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“Quit blubbering,” said Dick. “If the guys seen you carrying on like this ...” He shook his head darkly.

We were in Dick’s car. He was taking me to my hotel. After we’d buried Doc, we went back in the house and I grabbed a bottle of Johnny Black and guzzled about half of it. Then I went kind of nuts and started stumbling around and yelling that we shouldn’t have done it and it was pure murder and Dick had hustled me out of there and into his car. We went down La Brea then left on Hollywood Boulevard.

It was the middle of the night, and Hollywood seemed unpopulated, except for a few shivering whores and some bums sleeping under Hoover blankets. Pretty soon we pulled up in front of the Rutherford Hotel.

The lobby was empty. The elevator boy was some old geezer that looked about ninety. “What floor?” he said.

He was wearing a too-small blue uniform, and he had a huge red and yellow boil on his forehead that looked like it was about ready to pop. I couldn’t take my eyes off it. He knew what I was looking at, and he started getting mad. “*What floor?*” he nearly yelled.

“Eight,” I said. “I live on the eighth floor.”

He scowled at me and spat some tobacco juice into a spattered Chase & Sanborn coffee can then took us up.

We went in room 807 and I went in the bathroom and pissed and puked then came back and flopped on the bed. Dick was standing with his hands in his pockets looking bleakly out the window.

“This is a crummy hotel,” he said. “In a crummy town. On a crummy night.”

“I’m moving as soon as I can find something. Bud gave me a raise.”

“Yeah? Great. *You* get a raise. That’s rich.”

He walked over to the bed and untied my shoes and took them off. They made clunking noises as he dropped them on the floor.

“I’m leaving now, kid. Sleep it off. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Don’t leave yet. Tell me something.”

“Like what?”

“Tell me about why they call me Two Gun Danny.”

Dick sighed. “Ah, Danny ... it’s three o’clock in the fucking morning.”

“Come on, Dick. Please.”

Dick shook his head but at the same time he lit up a cigarette so I knew he wasn't going.

"You, me, and a couple other of the boys—one night we drove down to Long Beach. We took a water taxi out to the *Monfalcone*. It was one of them gambling boats. It was out past the three-mile limit, so it was all strictly legit."

"But what we were gonna do—that wasn't legit."

"That's right. We was on a heist job. We was gonna heist the dealers and the customers and we heard there was a safe with a hundred fifty G's in it and we was gonna heist that too. But that wasn't all."

"We were gonna sink it. Sink the *Monfalcone*."

"You wanna tell the fucking story? Yeah, that's right. We was gonna set it on fire and sink it 'cause Bud had a beef with the owner. And we didn't care if everybody on it drowned like rats.

"The main gambling room was the greatest place in the world. It had green carpet and chandeliers, and roulette wheels and dice tables and slot machines, and all the customers was dressed up like a million bucks. And the dames was all gorgeous, all of 'em looked like Ginger Rogers. Dozens and dozens of Ginger Rogers."

"Too bad we had to burn it up," I mumbled. "Too bad we had to sink it."

"Yeah, too bad. But orders is orders. So we was taking a little look-see at things when you got recognized by some muscle that worked for the boat and he started to take his piece out. But you slugged him in the jaw and knocked him colder than a mackerel and grabbed his piece and pulled out your own piece and jumped up on a blackjack table and yelled: 'Ladies and gentlemen, this here's a heist!'"

I was lying flat on my back, with my eyes closed. The room was spinning around me like a roulette wheel. Dick's voice seemed to be coming from further and further away.

“Then all these guys come running in the room, some of ‘em had sawed-offs and some of ‘em had pistols and you was screaming that they was dirty sons of bitches and blazing away at ‘em with a gun in each hand.”

Two Gun Danny. Then I couldn’t hear Dick anymore. I was in endless night, floating on a raft on an infinite sea. And the water was filled with floundering Ginger Rogerses in golden gowns. And they were in danger of drowning, but I welcomed them on my raft, one and all.