

Double Exposure

a Stoney Winston mystery by

Jim Stinson

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Film Props Incorporated is a two-acre attic

in west Hollywood stuffed with moose heads, spectacles, armor, space suits, and the lab equipment of half the mad scientists in movie history. Rummaging for props to rent, I once found a gun belt marked “Mr. Wayne” and a parlor lamp labeled “Tara”. That’s as close to the big time as I ever get: fondling saintly relics of my faith – finger bones and hanks of hair from movies long since canonized.

Today, I’d collected two surfboards and a volleyball set for Harry Hummel’s cola commercials (“Kids at the beach, okay? Lotsa tits and teeth”) when ancient Merv behind the counter called me to the phone. I walked through this sanctuary with honest reverence, threading past rubber swords, plowshares, plastic Tikis, and a flyblown gorilla, toward the front of the musty building.

The call was from Hummel: “Winston, get your ass over here.”

“Harry, you won’t believe this: I found a surfboard from *Gidget Goes Hawaiian*.”

“What?”

“I’d love to use it, but the design’s too dated.”

“What? What is this? Will you get your ass over here?”

“You said that.”

Click.

I sheathed the surfboards in the hatch of my ancient yellow Rabbit (1975 was not a vintage year for Volkswagen), flagged their protruding sterns to mollify the law, and struggled east on Santa Monica Boulevard toward Finart Studios, the ramshackle production lot on which Hummel rents an office.

As I rattled through the smog, the next few days unreeled before me, predictable as death: out to Malibu Beach with two trucks, a generator, and station wagons full of “talent” and wardrobe. Two days playing film director in sand-filled shoes, the sun broiling my dismaying new bald spot into a dime-sized plate of scrambled eggs. Two days more in my editor hat, faking the footage into some kind of sense. Then three weeks of unemployment while hustling another job.

Dear Mama: I am in Hollywood. It is fun. I am a big director now. You were wrong.

Oh yes: scrambling at the grubby edges of the Industry, presiding over cheap local commercials and droning industrials, writing training films to keep afloat and feature scripts for agents to reject.

I paused at the studio gate, to find One-Arm Willard snoozing as usual in the gatekeeper’s booth.

“Willard!”

His sleeping finger stabbed reflexively at a button and the gate lifted to admit me. Riffraff come and go unchecked while Willard slumbers on.

I should have stuck with acting. I’d be just as poor and pointless and just as much a whore, but at least I could work a nice warm brothel, instead of ankling around the streets.

I chugged along the tarmac road dividing scabby bungalow offices from sound stages that resembled stucco hangars. The Rabbit wheezed to a grateful halt in a parking space marked HARRY HUMMEL LIMITED. The perfect adjective for my employer.

Hummel was lurking in his scruffy office, behind a midden of crumpled production forms and take-out food wrappers that hid a grandiose pre-war mogul’s desk, now rapidly shedding its oak veneer.

As always, he skipped the pleasantries: “You line up the location, Winston?”

“How about Coronado for a change?”

“How many times do I have to tell you: no more than thirty miles from the fucking gate.”

“I love your finesse with adjectives, Harry.”

“What?” He struggled with that briefly, then reached the limit of his attention span and shrugged. Harry Hummel’s forty-four, with brass-blond hair and pale ceramic eyes. In the beard he’s forever starting, he resembles Henry VIII, just growing fat.

I sighed. “Malibu again?”

“Whatever.” He waved it off. Hummel stared at me, tried to invent a transition, failed of course, and plunged in anyway: “Do something for me.”

I returned his stare.

“Look at this tape.”

He pushed a videocassette into a recorder on the swaybacked table behind his desk and clicked on the color monitor. The speaker whispered electric hash and the screen displayed a snazzy pattern reminiscent of Hummel’s taste in sport jackets.

Aping bigger producers, he’d bought the rig to tape auditions, product tests, locations. But being Hummel, he’d spent three weeks locked in his office with a stack of porno tapes and then tired of his toy.

Sure enough, the picture coming up was the same sad ritual of clenching buns and straining faces and of course the ancient piston and cylinder: the wet machine. It must have been a so-called “loop,” a crude, silent effort without even a pretense of story. A carnal documentary of the crassest kind.

Hummel stared sourly at the tiny, striving figures. “I know the girl. That’s Lee Tolman.”

I didn’t bother to look. “One of your ladies, Harry?”

He killed the tape irritably. “I didn’t say I screwed the kid—just knew her.”

“Why the past tense?”

“Huh?”

Give me patience. Slowly and distinctly: “Why did you say *knew*?”

“She took off. You know how kids do.”

“Why are you showing me this tape?”

He wouldn’t quite look at me. “That’s—part of what I want you to do.”

Time for caution. I took refuge in another blank stare.

“You gotta find the original tape.”

No I don’t. I may have to stand under streetlights swinging my plastic purse, but I won’t run errands for producers—especially not for Hummel. I said as much.

Hummel essayed a calm, grave look, as he does when he’s about to *relate meaningfully*: “No kidding, Stoney. A very nice lady and a personal friend of mine has trouble.”

Hummel’s use of my nickname increased my suspicion. “I thought the girl disappeared.”

“I mean *Denise* Tolman, her mother. Someone wants her to pay fifty thou for the original tape.”

“The original’s probably film. Looks like Ektachrome.”

He waved away this picky technicality. “Point is, the tape shows her kid screwing somebody.”

“That’s not worth fifty thousand dollars. Not these days.”

“Denise thinks so.”

“Have her tell the police.”

“She wants to keep it like quiet.” He leveled sincere, ceramic eyes: “Stoney, you know the town, the Industry. You get things done. Denise wants *you*.”

“She does not; she barely knows me. You sold her on me, Hummel. Why?”

A long pause, during which Hummel’s struggle for plausibility was a minor pleasure to watch. Then he brightened: “She asked me who’s the smartest guy around and I just had to say Stoney Winston.”

“Flattery does not become you, Harry.”

“She’ll pay six bills a week for two weeks.”

“I have a job here.”

“Not anymore.” I stood up quickly and Hummel added, “But you get it back in two weeks.”

“You have six cola spots in production.”

“Big deal. I’ll direct them myself.”

“No.”

“Okay, big shot: you’re fired anyway. I’m sick of your smart-ass face.”

A reflective pause while my bankbook flashed before my eyes. “All right, I’ll go talk to Denise Tolman.”

“Whatever. Listen: do a good job and I’ll still let you cut the

spots.”

“Let joy be unconfined.”

“What?”

Chugging out to Pasadena in my ratty lemon Rabbit: through the tunnels, over the river—a foot-wide piddle in a concrete trough—and up the ancient freeway in the crisp September light.

I was conning myself into accepting the inescapable: thinking about two glorious expense-paid weeks away from Harry Hummel. No dreary trips to Malibu, no sand-filled shoes, no self-disgust at lavishing my attention on Cutrate Cola. A two-week reprieve before I had to start hustling again.

I eased around a ‘55 Porsche, now too valuable to be pushed to freeway speed.

I think I met Denise Tolman once: a Pasadena matron in preppie clothes. Her uncomplaining husband ran a little studio until cancer killed him. She needed the business to fund her Junior League lifestyle but wasn’t interested in running it; so she hired a manager and resumed good works in Pasadena.

A ‘67 “Chebbie” whistled by, rear end barely two inches off the concrete, full of Mexican-American kids in identical T-shirts.

I don’t know: porno tapes, extortion threats, disappearances—dangerous stuff, the lot.

But interesting. Maybe get some ideas for a script. Oh sure: to join all the others in my drawer.

San Rafael Circle turned out to be one street away from the Arroyo Seco—the gulch that holds the Rose Bowl. Expensive houses in the usual California mix: Revised Ranch, Retrained Colonial, Recycled Mansard. Not quite the Tudor forts and stone palazzi of the *really* rich a block away, but not loose change either. Denise Tolman’s home squatted at the end of a long, narrow driveway, with a shake roof, green shutters, and ivy everywhere. I parked my seedy Rabbit beside a Mercedes coupe and rang the doorbell. The Rabbit’s electric radiator fan was still whirring and I imagined it whispering to the Mercedes, “Pssst! The Fuhrer lives! Pass it on.”

A touch of paranoia there. In forty years, the Reich has menaced nothing but Detroit; but I was born in England a few years after the war and childhood attitudes die hard.

Sergeant-Major Winston was my father's title then. He named me Spencer Churchill Winston in a peculiar fit of patriotic humor. But "Stoney Winston" now attracts no notice and I've schooled myself to speak in bland Los Angelese, as if I were an immigrant from Kansas.

Denise Tolman opened the door, dressed in jeans and denim shirt, a garden trowel in hand. Hazel eyes in an indistinctly pretty face. Hair a bit too uniformly blond and pants a shade too tight, as if she'd bought the size she hoped she still could fit. Ten years ago, she'd have been a delicious sorority girl with a peachy bloom and bouncing hair. Even now, after a decade of fighting gravity, she was ripely charming. But her soft face and chirpy voice were still back in that sorority, ten years gone.

Ten years? Fifteen at most. How could she have a grown daughter?

She led the way past ten thousand dollars' worth of colonial furniture and out into a vast back yard, where I dropped into a redwood chair beside the pool.

"I'm so glad you came out here, Stoney."

"Hummel said he'd fire me if I didn't."

Wry brackets around her mouth showed she knew Hummel's courtly ways. "Did Harry tell you what it's all about?"

"He played the tape."

Denise troweled a hole in a flower bed, inserted a bulb of indeterminate species, and filled the hole again. "I saw some of it. I couldn't watch very much."

"I understand."

"I hope you can find the original tape." I waited out another little burial. "Harry says you know everything about the Industry: every scene shop, sound stage, and prop house in town. He says that's why you're a good production manager."

"I'm a director."

Denise interred another bulb.

"Where is Lee now?"

Denise appeared to sift possible answers, then lifted her hands: "I wish I knew. I walked into her room one day with an armful of clothes to put away. She never put away her clothes—did you ever know a girl that did?" Denise flashed a Cute smile, as if from habit. "And she was gone. Empty drawers and closets—well no, she never

took her best dresses—but everything else, even little pictures off the walls. The note said sort of, well, ‘good-bye’ and ‘thanks’ and—that was it.” Denise scooped another hole.

“How long ago was that?”

“About eight months.” She sculpted the hole, rounding it to perfection, as if to plant a soup can. “And I don’t know why.”

“Do you want me to find your daughter?”

“She was Roy’s daughter.” Denise enlarged the hole to fit a coffee tin. “My husband divorced Lee’s mother several years ago. She still lives up the coast, I think: Oxnard, Ventura—someplace like that. Pepe’d know.”

“Pepe?”

“Pepe Delgado, my studio manager. He used to make out her alimony checks.” A mournful smile. “Until Roy died.”

That explained how a woman her age could have a grown daughter. “I wondered where her red hair came from. Well, do you want me to find Lee?”

She stared into the hole for a long moment, then sighed. “I guess she’s eighteen, now. Maybe Lee wasn’t happy here.” She buried another bulb.

I changed the subject: “Denise, I know that tape distresses you, but why is it worth so much money?”

“Have you heard of Isaiah Hammond?”

“He runs a fundamentalist church in Burbank. Does a lot of TV.”

“A lot of movies too—mainly Bible stories. They show them on sheets in church basements.”

“And he makes the movies on your lot.”

“All the time. About half my income last year.”

“So they threaten to show the tape to the righteous Reverend Hammond. Do you think he’d yank his production from your studio?”

“Those awful people: they scream if a TV actress doesn’t wear a bra. I’m just afraid to take chances.”

“Hm. How did the extortioner contact you?”

“Somebody called me, and a tape arrived in the mail.”

“How are you to pay the money?”

“I don’t know yet. They say they’ll get back to me.”

I stood up. “Why me? Why haven’t you called the police?”

“I almost did, but I thought about it. Suppose they caught them.

There'd be publicity and Hammond would hear about it anyway." She rose, stabbing her trowel into the new little plot. "I can't afford that, Stoney. That crummy studio is all Roy—all I've got. And Pepe says nobody else wants to shoot there."

I'd worked on her lot, and recalling that cramped little warren, I could believe her. "I've never tried to find anyone before."

"I don't want you to find people. I just want the tape. Please, Stoney, you're all I can think of."

Her body language said *poor helpless me*, but the stress in her face was real enough. She'd lost her husband and her stepdaughter, and now her livelihood was about to leak away.

Whatever I did, it couldn't be just a junket—a two-week respite from horrible Hummel. "I'll have to think about it. I can't take your money for nothing. If there's a chance I can find that tape, I'll give it a shot."

"You can find it."

"I'll call you tomorrow."

"No, come back and tell me. We'll talk about it."

She offered her hand and, when I shook it, deposited bits of flower bed in my palm.

"Oh!" Smiling, flustered, she took my wrist and scraped my hand across her denim sleeve. "Tomorrow."

Piloting the Rabbit through the interchange they call "The Stack" (in helicopter shots its concrete branches swarm with metal aphids) I struggled up the Hollywood Freeway, reviewing the conversation with Denise.

I braked as an open semi groaning with produce whipped into line ahead of me. A vegetable dislodged, bounced off the concrete, smacked my grill. I'd killed a tomato.

Appealing woman, Denise—I mean *person*.

A sweet Grandma painted on a building side regarded me gravely as I passed. I assure you, Madam, this is simply business. Grandma looked unconvinced. Oh all right: appealing *woman*.

The issue was that tape. If I could find it, I'd actually earn the money. Maybe I could spot something in it that shows where it was made. Better have a look.

Through the open gate at Finart Studios (One-Arm Willard had

left to resume his nap at home) and over to Hummel's rented bungalow. His crimson Eldorado was gone, so Harry was home too, or out breathing on girls. I opened his dreary office, started up the video rig, and concentrated:

INTERIOR BEDROOM NIGHT

1. FULL SHOT: Rear view. Athletic male kneeling on bed, back to camera, between flapping knees of redheaded supine girl.

CUT TO:

2. WAIST SHOT: Her point of view. Her partner's a towheaded, straight-nosed surfing son with a face as blank as a cue ball.

CUT TO:

3. INSERT: The gynecological details.

CUT TO:

4. CLOSEUP: The surfer's point of view. Lee Tolman's head and shoulders against the sheet.

CUT TO:

5. FULL SHOT: Rear view as before. The girl revolves onto knees and elbows, pelvis cocked like a puppy with tail in the air and front paws on a bone.

CUT TO:

6. TIGHT CLOSEUP: Lee's face rhythmically pressing the sheet.

And so on and so forth at tedious length, this glorious old communion reduced to damp machinery. How anyone finds this erotic eludes me.

Distracted by these doggy rhythms, the mind wanders: how typical she is: pale, sloping breasts, slender arms and shanks, wall-to-wall freckles—except for the protected rump, where cool-white skin laps around the odd coral pimple, the single atoll mole.

These redheads: Irish, Danish, German, Pole; Gentile, Jew, and God knows what—a secret clan breeding true for centuries across countries and even races. Only three great families even now: Reddish Blond at one extreme; Irish Setter at the other; and in between, your Classic Carrot.

Like this girl: even her pubic hair's a hard, even orange—the too-perfect color of a nylon rug.

As I sat there sunk in pseudo anthropology, the dreary images chased across the tube: FULL SHOT, CLOSEUP, MEDIUM SHOT, CLOSEUP. Only the closeups seemed to register: Lee—Lee—Lee— Her face serenely strange under its carrot cloud; soft green gemstone eyes focused at infinity. Intercut with the other shots, her meditative face rebuked her wagging, spastic body.

I froze a closeup by chance as she glanced at the camera. The great green eyes watched me patiently; the face asked: *why are you looking?*

Because you've got me hooked.

Nonsense: she's just a girl in a sleazy film. The right freeze-frame makes *anyone* look eerie.

No, not "eerie"; something more. There was an odd transparency that gave the illusion of looking below the skin, beneath the skull, into a singular, sexless, inner beauty. She was beautiful, but she wasn't, but she *was*—and even frozen on the grainy little screen, she oscillated back and forth, compellingly. I stared for half a minute, as still as she was, then shook her image out of my head.

I jabbed *the pause* button and the ritual coupling resumed.

Hm: a truck shot; that meant a dolly. Four, maybe five lights—and up high too. No ceiling. Looked like a set. A studio.

Denise's studio? Well, it was a place to start. Maybe I *could* find Lee—I mean find the film.

In and out, in and out. Awful stuff. Ugh; enough. Profoundly depressed, I ejected the tape, returned the tawdry office to darkness, then pointed the Rabbit home to Laurel Canyon.

East Hollywood was snoozing in the late orange light: bungalows and stucco flats and unmarked warehouses hiding obscure goods. A frail grandma was pushing home a giant supermarket cart bearing two tiny parcels full of supper.

The Angelus.

I was still evading Lee's green-eyed gaze when I got home to find my young landlady on her knees in the flowers beside the drive.

Plants: in pots, plots, boxes, beds, and barrels, L.A. plants obsessively.

“Hi, Sally.”

She sat up and grinned, displaying a T-shirt emblazoned “GOOD AND PLENTY!” The candy box depicted was contorted into a topologist’s erotic dream.

“Aren’t you uncomfortable without your undies?”

She pushed at her damp, Viking hair. “Nope, I took the *Cosmopolitan* test.”

“The what?”

“They ran an article on how to tell if you could go braless.” She stood up, dusting her hands on filthy shorts. “See, you take a pencil and push it up under your boob.”

“Ow!”

“*Horizontally*, dimbulb. If you can’t hold the pencil, you stick out enough to do without a bra. If the pencil stays there, you’re too droopy.”

“And what was your result?”

“Do you realize how *male* this whole discussion is? Listen: I made lasagna.”

“Do you realize how *female* that transition was?”

Sally ignored this feeble face-saving. “What do you say? I’ve got a ton of it.”

“I don’t know, Sally...”

“Well, see how you feel later. I’m going to go shower. I’m all stuck together.” She tugged at her damp T-shirt and the candy box approached its normal shape.

Sally was built to special order for Wagner or Renoir, whose taste I most certainly share; and our dinners often lead to other things that are fun too.

Oh hell. To be honest, I love Sally, obsessively, foolishly—and without encouragement. She chortles at my smart remarks and pats my arm in passing as we cook rich suppers in her warm kitchen. She shows me the sardonic wit she can’t reveal at work. And when we wander off to bed, she wraps me in an embrace so comprehensive it engulfs me, soul and body.

But in the morning she rises cheerfully to resume a life as disconnected from mine as if we’d simply shared a bus seat.

Drives me nuts.

Sally ambled toward the house, still cleaning her hands on her khaki behind. She'd got the hillside cottage in a divorce settlement and rented me the downstairs flat to help pay the mortgage. Considering my income, her choice was ill-advised.

I descended eight steps to my front door, dreading the evening routine. Today's mail: three final notice bills and an offer to sell me desert property:

"YES! Mr. S. Wimpston, You are a WINNER!!!"

I unlocked the flimsy door and trudged into my dank, empty cave: cinder block bookcases on the left wall, floor to ceiling and corner to corner. Back wall mostly hidden by my photographs in snap-together frames. Living room paved with dirty clothes. I waded through them to the TV set to check the guide: zilch. Over to the kitchen on the right-hand side to consult the fridge: ditto. Dispensing the last can of beer. Adding today's wardrobe to the bedroom floor and into the bathroom, which was redolent of mildew. Its only virtue is a walk-in shower.

The apartment shows the misplaced enterprise of Sally's former husband. He'd fixed it up to rent for several hundred a month. But since it's half buried in the hillside, the back rooms are almost windowless and the seeping winter rains paint Rorschachs on the walls. I got it cheap.

I wet the rigid washcloth: hm, a trifle ripe, as usual. Better soap it extra hard. Clanking pipes—another drawback—revealed Sally in her own shower overhead, lathering her abundance as promised. I turned on my own shower.

"SONOFABITCH!" came through the ceiling.

Oops. The sudden water pressure drop guaranteed that Sally's abundance was now slightly scalded. Under my own water, meditating on the scene above: Sally scrubbing, snorting in the spray. Slippery trickles snaking down her back. Cornsilk hair plastered to her brown neck. Singing "When I'm Sixty-Four" in a brazen, female baritone.

Maybe I should reassess that dinner invitation.

Sure, to eat her food and share her day and listen to some Mozart in the dusk; to bloody my head against her wall of independence.

Standing in the musty stall, I watched the runoff eddy around my

big flat feet.

Still, after a day of Harry Hummel, Denise Tolman, and passive, puzzled Lee, I needed to be around a grown-up.

And Sally was eminently qualified.

2

Santa ana light the next morning

on the way back to Pasadena, as desert winds drove out the smog and sucked the air dry. Hillside houses snapped into phony 3-D Technicolor and the sky was a perfect cyclorama. The view was breathtaking but subtly unconvincing — an elaborate model shot. Eighty degrees at nine A.M. and the hard glare promised twenty more by noon.

I pursued a favorite pastime as I drove: conversing with imaginary passengers. Today my spectral guest was Woody Allen.

He regarded the surreal landscape balefully through his horn-rims: “L.A. Wonderful; my favorite place. Who built those houses, Mattel?”

“You get used to them.”

“Sartre was wrong, believe me. Hell is Southern California.”

“For some people.”

“Look what it did to you. You used to be English, like Matthew Arnold or Virginia Woolf. But now, who could tell?”

“It’s just my tan.”

“If a tan is so important, take a cruise.” Woody leveled large, sad eyes: “You know you’re doomed? First your legs atrophy, then you

start telling everyone to ‘have a good one.’ Before you know it, you’re breathing through your mouth. Jesus, watch it!” He clutched his armrest spastically as the Rabbit hurtled around a Buick piloted by a serene grandma too short to see over her steering wheel. The armrest came off in his hand.

“At least there’s freedom here.”

“Freedom for what: to dry your brain like a raisin? Where’re we going?”

“Pasadena.”

He groaned, his worst suspicions confirmed: “California hell. And with my luck, I’ll spend eternity watching the Rose Parade. Listen, just *being* here is unbelievably stressful. Why are you putting me through this?”

“I need advice. If you had to investigate something, how would you do it?”

“Like Nero Wolfe: I’d stay in New York — *indoors*. Look, that’s not really the problem, so what do you say we get right to it.”

“It’s the girl in the film.”

“Better; much better. What about her?”

“She’s reaching me.”

“How?”

“She looks so ethereal. How could she make a film like that?”

Woody nodded until his specs bounced on his nose. “Okay. Right. Suddenly it’s clear: you have this fantastic landlady—”

“How did Sally get in this?”

“A fantastic person—I mean we are talking borderline implausible: smart, together, with a body some teenage boy dreamed up in the dark.”

“Look—”

“She feeds you, talks to you, sleeps with you; she even *likes* you. But you want more and she won’t give it. So you get back at her: you develop an obsession with this movie chick who is spiritual on top but carnal on the bottom and adjacent parts. This obsession is irrational; maybe neurotic; so to rationalize it, you ask me, the Fellini of flaky females.”

“The Allen of alliteration.”

“Don’t evade the issue, which is, you have a problem: you’re determined to be hooked on a girl you never met; you can’t reconcile what she looks like with what she’s doing in that film; and you can’t

admit the combination pressurizes your pants.”

“Hey!”

“Come *on*: the whorehouse madonna, the slime angel—I have to tell you these oxymorons are old hat. On top of which, you’re leching at her mother too.”

“Stepmother.”

“So technically it’s not incest. Technically.” He shook his head with weary sympathy. “My friend, you live a highly developed fantasy life, and so what, who doesn’t? But you’re in very great danger of confusing it with reality. Listen: I gotta split; this air is killing my sinuses.”

“Thanks for the advice—I guess.”

His spindly form was growing transparent. “I’ll give you one more piece: be totally careful, Winston. *This is not a game.*”

Woody vanished.

Denise Tolman stood at the maple table in her bright yellow breakfast room, snipping food coupons out of the newspaper. A button-down shirt in a tablecloth check this morning, plus tight jeans whose pocket stitching presumably sent status messages to those who could decode them. I couldn’t.

She didn’t look at me as I spoke: “Denise, I’ve decided to take the job.”

Her contour-handled scissors snickered out a coffee coupon, which she added to a growing pile.

I tried again: “Since Lee is in that tape, she has to know who shot it. So the obvious plan is to find her.”

The scissors hesitated, then stalked an orange juice discount.

“You have no idea where she went?”

Denise scanned the paper for more prey.

“The tape was probably shot in a studio.”

The scissors darted after new quarry.

“Maybe *your* studio. It’s a place to start looking.”

Her face tightened. “Don’t go there.”

“I’ll just say you asked me to find her. I don’t have to mention the tape.”

“Please don’t go.” She sifted coupons, counting the day’s haul.

“Look Denise: you’re paying me for two weeks. Now I can relax

at the beach and phone in fairy tales or I can get that tape back. Which is it to be?"

"Maybe I'll try the market up on Linda Vista."

"Denise!"

She looked at me as if she'd walked into a store and then forgotten what she'd come for.

"Denise, what is the matter?"

She picked up a shoulder bag covered with pockets; unzipped a pocket; zipped the pocket; unzipped another; folded her cuttings; stored them deliberately; zipped the pocket. "I thought I had a Cheerios coupon."

Perhaps this arid light had driven her round the bend. They say Santa Ana winds unglue people. Circling the table, I grasped her arms gently, just below her shoulders.

"Anybody home?"

A six-second freeze-frame, then her left eye extruded one fat teardrop, which struggled through an eyelash, plopped into the faint depression at the bottom of her eye socket, then made a stately progress down her plump cheek. It seemed to take an hour. Even in the air conditioning, she exuded a certain warm femaleness, mixed with breakfast smells.

"What's wrong, Denise?"

She scraped at the tear track with an index finger, then made an interminable job of refolding the newspaper. Finally: "I'm sorry I got upset."

"Why don't you want me to go to your studio?"

"The church group's shooting there today."

"I won't talk to them. But it's logical to start at the studio. Did Lee ever go there?"

"Yes—well, not often. I don't know."

"Hm. Tell me about the extortion."

"Someone called and said I'd be getting a tape in the mail. For my own good, I'd better play it. I don't have a recorder, so when the tape came, I took it to Harry."

"Why Hummel?"

"Harry and I are friends." The dropped eyelashes suggested more than friendship. "I was shocked by the tape, of course. I mean, I never even saw a hard-core movie. And when I recognized Lee ..."

"What happened next?"

“She called back and said she wanted fifty thousand dollars or Isaiah Hammond would see the tape.”

“She?”

“It was a woman. Remember how I said Hammond gives me half my business? Well it’s more than just half—it’s really most of it. That’s why I’m so worried.”

“But you didn’t want to pay.”

“Fifty thousand dollars?” Her eyes and voice filled up again. “That’s three months’ gross. And with the overhead, there’s nothing left. Thank God Roy had mortgage life insurance on this house or I’d be out on the street with my furniture.”

“Did the caller sound like Lee, by any chance?”

Denise looked surprised. “Maybe.”

“Did you recognize her voice?”

“No. Why do you think it was Lee?”

My turn to play with the newspaper, while phrasing a diplomatic reply. “Yesterday, you hinted that you and your stepdaughter didn’t get along. Could Lee be getting back at you for something?”

She clenched her lips to stop their trembling. Then: “I hope not. I really tried so hard with her.”

I didn’t push it. “Okay, Denise, call your studio manager and say I’m coming. I think we can sort this out.”

Moving close to me, Denise stared hard at my face, switching her gaze back and forth as if to verify that my two eyes matched. “I hope so, Stoney. I don’t have to tell you what this means to me.”

I swung the Rabbit off the freeway at Santa Monica Boulevard and rattled past the sex shops and porno movies around Western Avenue, toward Denise’s tiny studio, a block off Santa Monica. The dusty brown sound stage wall proclaimed “Tolman Studios” in faded paint. “Studios” was stretching it for a tired stucco hangar equipped with a dwarf lobby, a rental bay full of lights and grip equipment, and a few mangy cubicles for editing and offices. The sound stage itself was barely big enough for shooting commercials and the entire lot wasn’t a fifth the size of Finart Studios six blocks west, where Hummel rents his office.

I zipped into the front parking lot, which was unguarded by a gate, and penned the Rabbit in a space lettered “21st Century

Enterprises”—a commercial production house that expired four years back.

A relief to exchange the surreal sunshine outside for the silent gloom within. I padded down a dingy corridor lit by egg crate fluorescents, heaved open the massive, padded door, and stepped into the tiny sound stage.

The usual tableau: foreground confusion of lights, chairs, and lounging technicians silhouetted by the lit set behind them: a tent contrived from draperies and dressed with potted palms. An imposing gent in Sunday School pageant costume being patted by a squatly makeup man. An Isaiah Hammond show, no doubt.

The fat, weary director was fighting with the camera man: “Whaddya got?”

“Too high. I can see the floor.”

“Oh hell, you gotta boom down for this shot.”

“What can I say? The floor is in the frame.”

“Well tilt up; I mean, Jesus.”

“I’ll lose him.”

“Hell. Satch!” The key grip uncoiled from a chair and ambled up.

“Get him a half-apple.”

The key grip produced a blue wooden box. Old Testament Grandpa climbed aboard.

“How’s that?”

“Now he’s out of his key.”

“Hell. Enders!” Now the gaffer headed toward the key light with all deliberate speed. He began adjusting it as I retreated to the hall and climbed the musty stairs to the second floor offices.

Pepe Delgado was a very busy manager. He signed three letters (first shaking back a gold wrist chain), banged a ledger shut, and dropped a stack of papers in his OUT basket, displacing a puff of dust. “Pepe...”

“One moment.” He keyed the antique intercom: “Hold my calls!”

“Nobody’s out there.”

“No? Ah. Perhaps the girl went to lunch.” He shot his cuffs, clasped his hands, and smiled. “Now: my undivided attention.”

“Denise Tolman asked me to find her daughter.”

“She is a nice lady, that one.”

“How about her daughter Lee?”

Pepe mimed “remembering,” eyes beseeching Heaven, pursed lips lifting his little mustache horizontal, painful cogitation.

Finally: “I don’t recall her.”

“You’ve never met her?”

Pepe was about as Mexican as a plastic taco, but he saw himself as Ricardo Montalban. He hunched thin, velour-coated shoulders in a Latin shrug: “That is what I said, my friend.”

“And you’re certain she never came to this studio?”

“I am sorry, my friend; I am too busy to keep track of visitors.”

I was already tired of being Pepe’s friend. “Denise said you had the address of Roy Tolman’s first wife.”

“I guess I got it someplace, but it is three years old.”

“I’ll take it anyway.”

“It might be in my files.”

“Would you get it for me please?”

“My pleasure.” He pronounced it to rhyme with *pressure*.

He didn’t move. Neither did I. We waited.

Finally, with another shrug and a windy sigh, Pepe went to a filing cabinet and, striking a reflective pose, depicted “remembering” again. Then, with a *eureka!* flourish, he pulled the top drawer, rose on dainty tiptoes to augment his five feet-four, and scanned the folders. He yanked one out.

“Rachel Gershon: 1229 Sea Vista, Ventura.”

“Phone?”

Pepe smiled with sour pleasure: “No listing.” Tossing the folder at the file drawer, he swept across to his office door and opened it with ostentatious meaning.

“I may want to ask some questions later, Pepe.”

“I will attempt to fit you in.” He shut the door behind me.

“The girl’s” desk was still vacant when I crossed the outer office, except for a two-year-old calendar. One of those long lunches.

Back down the creaking stairs and into the sound stage, just in time for a take. The assistant camera man extended the slate one-handed, two fingers holding the clap stick open.

“Speed.”

“Mark it.”

The sound man muttered into the mike beside his Nagra recorder, "Sixteen baker take three." *Clack!* The assistant scuttled back to the Eclair camera, ready to pull focus.

"And action."

Grandpa struck a hortatory pose, intoning, "*And when Jehu was come to Jezreel, Jezebel heard of it; and she painted her face, and tired her head, and looked out at a window.*"

The delivery was somewhere between old Finlay Currie and John Huston at his most oracular: "*And he said, 'Throw her down.' So they threw her down: and some of her blood was sprinkled on the wall, and on the horses: and he trode her underfoot.*"

Trode?

The key grip twisted a dolly knob and the camera crept silently downward. "Go, see now this cursed woman, and bury her: for she is a king's daughter."

The key grip eased the crab dolly back from the actor while the assistant pulled focus. "*And they went to bury her: but they found no more of her than the skull, and the feet, and the palms of her hands.*"

The script girl followed the text with a pencil, mouthing each word. "*And the carcase of Jezebel shall be as dung upon the face of the field in the portion of...* what? What's that word?"

"Holy Jesus, cut!"

Grandpa's voice lost thirty years and twenty DB of bass: "The fucking dolly blocked my cue card."

"Take four right away."

But the assistant caroled, "Reload!"

"Jee-zus *Christ!*"

I gathered the Rev. Hammond was not on the set today.

I latched the massive sound stage door and turned back into the corridor to confront a girl clacking toward me in high-heeled boots. She made a stirring long shot but did not quite survive the close-up: chestnut pageboy wig, lashes like tufts of blacking brush, deltas of umber makeup faking cheekbones. Sleeveless undershirt under a Kit Carson fringed jacket and jeans so tight they squeezed her flesh into small parentheses bracketing her hips. She carried a Lucite tray like a cigarette girl in a gangster picture.

She looked at the door. "They making one?"

“Red light’s off. They’re reloading.” The little tray compartments were packed with pills, tablets, lozenges, capsules—tan, brown, white, and olive—in every size from pinheads to stream pebbles.

She saw me looking. “Vitamins.”

“All of them?”

“Yeh really; and minerals and protein concentrate—stuff like that. Oh hell.” She pursed sticky lips at the now-revolving light beside the door. “They’re shooting again.” She clopped into a room opposite the sound stage door and dropped the tray on a table.

I followed. “What are they for?”

Under the android makeup, her smile was sweetly natural. “I’m a consultant like. See, I find out about your health and eating habits and stuff and then I prescribe vitamins.”

“Quite a variety.”

“Well sure. Natural health is real hard, cause we’re so corrupt.” I blinked. “I mean our eating and health and stuff. How’s your sex life? Oh it’s okay; I’m like a doctor, right? Nothing personal.”

“Why do you ask?”

She picked out a translucent pill full of yellow goop. “Know what this is?”

“Vitamin E?”

“Mainly, but this is different; exclusive. See those grains? Pot. Female essence. Dynamite stuff.”

“A personal testimonial?”

She frowned, struggling with the idea, then grinned. Like her smile, her teeth were engagingly natural and slightly crooked. “You got a great vocabulary. I respect that. Hey, is Pepe on the floor?”

“He was upstairs in his office. Is Pepe a client?”

“Yeh, I’m working on his wind—like he cuts the cheese a lot, you know? Embarrassing. I’m trying vitamin C.”

I considered this therapy gravely, then: “Do you have a business card?”

“Naw. I’m Peeper Martin.”

“Stoney Winston.”

“A cowboy name—only you don’t look like one.” She shook my hand with cheerful vigor.

“Peeper, I’m doing some work for Denise Tolman. She owns this lot. I’m looking for her daughter, Lee.”

“Official?” The candor washed out of her face. “Hey listen: she’s

got a right to live her life.”

“You bet she does. I just need to find her to give her money.” Peeper relaxed slightly. “Denise, uh, had an offer to sell the studio and of course Lee would be involved.”

I was pleased with this improvisation, but it only revived Peeper’s wariness. “She gonna sell the lot?”

“Just an offer. Maybe nothing to it.”

“Yeh, well I gotta see Pepe—I mean about his vitamins.” She stepped out into the hall.

“Where can I find Lee?”

Peeper stood quite still, looking at me from under her sticky eyelashes. Then she walked slowly back into the room. “You know, you send funny waves.” Like Denise earlier, she stared into my eyes, one at a time. “Kinda smartass—but positive.”

I looked at her, intrigued by this nice chipper person disguised as a tart, like a happy child in a Halloween suit. As if still reading those waves of mine, she snapped her gawky grin.

“Try the fag.”

“Not an exclusive label in these parts.”

“Um, Wishbourne. Candy Wishbourne. Are you ready for that name?”

“I know Candy; the art director.”

“Right; well, she talked about him sometimes.” Peeper grabbed her tray of nostrums.

“Thanks. Say, do those things earn you a living?”

She cocked the tray on her hip and posed. “Naw, I’m a movie star.” Then she clattered off up the hall, obviously hot to tell Pepe that Denise was selling the lot.

Lying on the water bed in Sally’s twilit bedroom, playing stethoscope: my right ear pillowed on her warm sternum, cycling slowly up and down like an anchored boat. I was listening to her romantic heartbeat and the more prosaic bumbles of her supper, processing. My right eye was blinded by flesh, leaving my left one to interpret Sally’s contours without benefit of depth perception. From my worm’s-eye angle, I traced a vast Saharan landscape of dunes undulating toward a tiny, golden cloud so distant it might have been a mirage, hovering at the base of foothill thighs.

Rocked by Sally's gentle breath and lulled by muffled peristalsis, I was slipping into a light doze.

"Am I putting you to sleep?"

"Wha? Oh! No, I'm tracking every word. You said he was worried about peripherals. Sally was rehearsing the incomprehensible details of her day at work, selling computers.

"You *did* hear me. But when I told him what you could do with an RS232 port, I really turned him around. I *know* I'm going to land that order." Sally's one of the best salesmen in her region.

She scratched my back and the tan landscape danced a gentle hula. "That'll put my year-to-date way over last year's. Hey! Then we could take a vacation." Excited, she wrapped her arm about me so I was pillowed fore and aft.

"Stoney, are you listening?"

"Got my earmuffs on." Sally smelled of sunshine and apples.

"About a vacation?"

"Let's get married instead."

"No."

"Why not, Sally?"

"Same reason as last night."

The sting of it turned me defensive: "No vacation until I can pay half."

My resilient cave tensed around me. "Shove off!"

She swung out of bed and thudded into the kitchen, a thoroughbred Clydesdale mare. The fridge door slammed and bottles clanked as she worked off her annoyance through excess percussion.

Laurel Canyon insects droned mantras in the dusk.

To be honest, there's no good reason why she should commit to me. When I work, I'm away on location half the time. And when I don't, I'm down at Unemployment. Which is partly why she earns four times what I do.

She can rent my head and body for a kind word and a plate of pasta, so why should she pay upkeep and depreciation on me?

Winston is not cost-effective.

Sally returned with fresh bottles of Dos Equis beer and stretched out at right angles across the head of the bed.

Dank silence while we sucked our beers.

"I'm sorry, Sally, but you can't have it both ways. You can't be independent if I'm dependent."

“Your ego can’t stand living off a mere woman.”

I rose on one elbow to scan the length of her. “I’d call you anything but ‘mere.’”

“You mean fat.”

Oversensitive. In fact, Sally has just enough substance to look properly female: a cheerful, ripe convexity. I lay back, pillowed on her middle.

“Though I do wish the bloody Industry would let me earn a living.”

My head bounced with Sally’s chuckle. “*Bloody*. You don’t often use British words.”

“I’m not British—haven’t been for half my life.”

“But you’re not quite American either.” She sat upright. “What *are* you?”

A long pause while the crickets went on vamping in the trees beyond the deck outside. What was I? Small-bore thinker, would-be artist, poser, floater, detached from my own culture and shipped off to be the purest kind of Californian: an immigrant to a nation-state.

“Let’s say I’m prone to self-dramatizing.”

Sally ignored that. “Why did you leave England?”

“Not my choice; I was just a kid. When my mother got fed up with being an army wife, she took me as far away as possible. I guess Los Angeles was the best she could think of, this side of Kuala Lumpur.”

And my old dad got emergency leave to fly to L. A. where he pleaded with her to come back and then wept alone in my dark bedroom before flying back and disappearing from my life.

As if she sensed my feelings, Sally wrapped her arms around her knees, trapping my head completely.

“You’re flattening my ears.”

She released me and I rolled over to lie on my back beside her.

“Sorry I overreacted to your vacation offer.”

“Okay.” She got up on her knees, planted a palm on either side of me, and started a slow reverse push-up. “Cootchy-coo, Stoney.” She swung back and forth, back and forth, upside-down bells tolling gently.

“And I promise to lighten up.”

“Shut up, Stoney.”

Sally descended like summer twilight.