

Fulton Street Noir

LARRY HILL

In the summer of 1950, I got a job working the elevator in the five-story Brix Office Building in downtown Fresno. I'd just graduated from high school and would be starting college in the fall. Downtown wasn't new to me, but any kind of regimented work was, so I boarded the bus each morning, lunch pail in hand, with a whiff of suspense in the air at what each day might bring to me.

"I see you brought your reading material," Gloria said, her attention on me now as I entered the Brix Building's small parlor with a soft-cover booklet I'd been reading on the bus snug against my side.

"Yeah." I breathed in the mix of early sun off the glass doors and fresh printer's ink from the stack of newspapers there on the marble floor. Blond hair piled on her head, Gloria stood fronting her hostess station, the green felt counter, the glass-covered case of cigarettes, cigars, breath mints, and assorted chewing gums.

"Another Ellery Queen magazine?" she asked.

"The new Black Mask," I answered, wishing I could open my lunch pail and guzzle from my thermos enough iced tea to wet my throat. In the short time I'd been here, I had learned that Gloria reduced the various males she encountered to embers should she entertain the notion. Yeah, Gloria was something. Something bright and shiny in the way she dressed, the way she carried herself. Something far from my just-turned-eighteen life.

"You've got that faraway look in your eyes," she told me as I reached behind her counter to trade my reading material and lunch pail for my work cap. She faced me, frowned, and adjusted the soft, red headpiece over my bad haircut. This, along with a white or soft-patterned shirt and pleated khaki pants from home, made up my uniform. "You know the meaning of noir?"

New-aah was how she said it. The word that had fascinated me for days. *Leave it to her*, I thought, *to somehow turn up my interest for that word and hit me with it before I can adjust my eyes to the flash of her teeth.*

"Means black in French," I said.

"You study French?"

"Art," I said. "I've seen it on tubes of black oil paint."

"But you know it in context to literature?"

“A little bit.”

I'd read popular novels such as *I Wake Up Screaming* by Steven Fisher, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity* by James M. Cain that lived outside the literary mainstream. Never preferred reading in any English class I'd attended, rough-edged titles such as these found their way into highly profitable Hollywood movies. *Nightmare Alley*, a novel by William Lindsay Graham shot into my mind. If Gloria wanted a taste of noir, I could quote lines from this novel made into a film that could make her gasp.

The early crowd would be entering the building soon. No time to tell Gloria that she wasn't talking to some rube who didn't know his way around the library stacks. No time to mention my recent trip to San Francisco, where Don, my best friend, and I drank beer with our doctored drivers licenses in Coffee Dan's 24-hour nightclub. Speaking of noir, I'd learned that Dashiell Hammett once lived above that legendary basement club and had written *The Maltese Falcon* there. Bet Gloria didn't know that.

The day progressed quickly. This was my second week on the job, and I felt confident in my ability to run that small cubicle up and down its shaft without mishap. The duty was a simple one. Rarely did I ask an occupant to watch her step while I operated the brass leveling device, a simple task once you got the hang of it.

That day, I glanced at my passengers with new interest. The guy wearing his fedora low over his eyes, the way he guided the young woman with him, his palm just above her bottom, her hair long, black, smelling of smoke. Man, it was obvious they were involved in something that could curdle your blood. And that innocent-looking babe with the alligator briefcase clutched to her bustline. What floor would she request, and how much cash was in that odd piece of luggage? Hundreds. Maybe thousands. *One thing about noir*, I thought. *It has to be something you, in your most vulnerable state, might be sucker enough to get involved with. Or at least picture yourself falling for in a wild dream.*

While waiting to load passengers on the main floor, I observed Gloria interacting with the many professional men who frequented the upstairs offices. She plied them with their favorite newspapers and expensive cigars, and then beat them—double or nothing—at liars dice for the cost of those items. I caught her eye once after an elderly man in a double-breasted suit that spoke of John Richards Men's Wear on other side of Fulton Street, handed her a bill I'd bet was a

twenty. She shot me a glance that spoke of vice, and I swear she lip-synced the word *noir* across the space to me.

So, yeah, I knew something of the malicious side of life. I'd attended the fourth and fifth grades of a grammar school in Long Beach during World War II and had visited the nearby City of Angels, where movies were made. Front pages that headlined the war also covered the Zoot Suit and Black Dahlia murders. I wasn't completely green to the horror some humans were capable of. And those shadows we all walk through at times—I'd learned to respect their darker shades.

At noon, Herb, the maintenance guy, traded his short work apron for his red cap and waddled his five-foot-two frame over to take my place at the elevator. I'd decided to dash across Fulton and order something from the soda fountain at Woolworth's. My friend Don was coming by to pick me up after work, and I'd share my lunch pail with him later.

Gloria halted me. "Hoping to see that cute girl behind Woolworth's soda fountain?" she asked.

I didn't stop. No sharp retort came to me. I felt dull, as if the elevator trips had made me punch drunk. I began my walk across the street, a trudge really, for I owned no stylish stroll, nor did I have an inner music to guide me.

Where was my music? I'd been searching for months without any luck. There I was, under a marquee, letters above spelling Woolworth's. Roman in style, rounded face, maybe 30-inches in height, handcrafted from hickory and gilded with 24-carat gold leaf. Lighted with simple floodlights, they'd earn my praise as being America's most perfect signage years later when I helped fabricate a like set for a store in Bakersfield. There had to be music above the general din of patrons and the ping when the elevator doors opened to lift another set of shoppers to the mezzanine. Where was my generation's music? *You just have to learn to find its sounds*, I told myself.

Her name was Lily, and I'd said about five words to her. She was slight, her limbs nimble in her starched uniform, her face a blur of farm freckles and earnest desire to fulfill her duties behind the counter.

"What is your favorite song?" I asked her.

When she smiled, her eyes glistened.

"I'm supposed to ask you what you want to order."

I looked left and right. Not much action yet along the soda fountain stools.

“My favorite song is, *‘I Met a Million Dollar Baby in a Five and Ten Cent Store.’*”

Her jaw tightened, and her words came out small and crisp. “What can I get you?”

It hit me that I’d been thinking of a record I’d recently picked out at the Sherman & Clay store by an orchestra featuring the vocal stylings of Russ Columbo, a volume of tunes, really, that went back a few years. I thought both Columbo and Bing Crosby had great versions of that song, the way they used the microphone to effortlessly swing the melody. It sounded like they were singing straight into your being, not into a megaphone the way Rudy Vallee and other crooners of that time had. Now, how would I explain this to Lily? She looked as if she wanted to run away from me and find solace along her other patrons. Feeling like bolting myself, I ordered a cherry coke and watched her write down the order and pivot away from me.

She did mutter, “Thanks,” later when I took care of the bill, her eyes softer this time. “Please visit us again,” she said in a rehearsed tone. “We’ve expanded our lunch counter menu.”

“Sorry about the million-dollar baby stuff,” I told her. “It came out before I could catch it.”

She managed a crooked grin. “Don’t Fence Me In.”

“What?”

“My favorite song,” she said. “You asked me what it was.”

I got up and aimed myself at the book-and-magazine display back near the store’s street windows. There, I lost myself in the standard fare of dime-store literature. *Seek and ye shall find hidden treasure* was my motto. Last week, I’d purchased *Criss Cross* a hard-boiled thriller by Don Tracy, off these same racks. Maybe today I’d get lucky again.

Then, I spotted it. Not a western as it first appeared to be. Not with that turntable and megaphone on the cover and the title in a depression-era typeface. *They Shoot Horses Don’t They?*

I picked it up and got a feel of it. Fifty-four cents of paperback. I thumbed through a few pages and figured out it was a story about two kids trying to make it in Hollywood. Yeah, here they are the two of them a few pages in. They’ve missed the bus on Melrose Avenue. He suggests they sit in the nearby park, get to know one another.

“All right,” she says. “I got a bellyful of moving pictures—let’s go sit and hate a bunch of people.”

“Noir,” I whispered. If she didn’t plan to invite this guy into some dark scheme, I’d eat my elevator boy cap.

When I returned to work, Herb offered to give me a break around two o’clock if I, in return, would change a couple of lights that required using his tallest ladder. He opened an empty office for me on the third floor, where I checked out my new paperback. Written by Horace McCoy, the slim volume’s action took place in an old ballroom constructed on the end of a pier in Santa Monica during a dance marathon. Big money to the winning couple, and a chance to show yourself to all the movie people on hand for the spectacle. I could smell the desperation coming off McCoy’s characters. That inner voice I used to read the story grabbed me by the throat. “*You are going to remember this book,*” it told me.

Leaving the empty office, I spotted Herb standing at the elevator. He’d just let the young woman with the exotic briefcase off on this floor. Without the briefcase now, she was walking away from us in net stockings and high-heel pumps, down the hall and into 308. Something in her walk reminded me of what? A girl I’d seen before. Maybe in a movie. One of those B movies billed as a *noirish thriller*.

I looked at Herb. “Who’s in 308?”

“Guy who wears those pinstripe suits.”

“Guy I told you was a private dick?”

Herb smiled. “Guy whose door says he’s a psychiatrist.”

“Noir!” I shouted.

Herb formed a V with his fingers, put it to his lips, and made like he was blowing a trumpet, one hand working a mute back and forth in front of him.

“New-ahh, new-aah, new-aah,” I sang, in syncopation to his gestures, thinking that, in our mutual ignorance, we’d established a connection.

I returned to my duty as elevator boy, and the afternoon wore on. At 4:30 that afternoon, a member of the night crew relieved me, a young man who would help clean and secure the building later in the evening. I put my cap back behind Gloria’s station and brandished my new book in her face.

“You bought a western?” she asked.

“Don’t let the title fool you,” I told her. “This little book might be the noir to end all noirs.” I watched her move behind her counter. Any minute she’d be challenged to liars dice by one of her steady male customers coming down from his office. Now, I thought, might be a good time to try my luck at her green felt counter.

I tapped my finger on her display case. “How about we go double or nothing for two of those Bering cigars?”

She straightened and crossed her arms. “Thought you didn’t smoke.”

“A cigar now and then,” I said. “To celebrate my great, great, great grandfather, Vitus Bering.” *True*, I wanted to tell her. *My mother is a direct descendent of the Danish explorer who’d discovered the Bering Sea and the Bering Strait.*

Gloria opened the case and withdrew two small aluminum tubes. “These two fine cigars will cost you two bucks if you lose.”

I put my palm over one of the leather dice boxes. She did the same and winked at me. “Okay slugger,” she said in her lowest voice. “Roll ‘em and weep.”

Ten minutes later, my friend Don Thomas pulled his brother’s’ molded, pre-war Mercury sedan up to the curb outside. I placed my lunch pail and my new pocketbook on the backseat and hopped in.

Right away, Don spotted the two cigars in my shirt pocket.

“Must have set you back at least a buck,” he said.

“Two bucks.”

I didn’t elaborate on how Gloria figured I’d try to bluff her on my first call. Man, it was as if she’d been waiting in the bushes for me. I glanced at Don. His eyes were set on the crowded street, the possibilities under a sun that would eventually give way to the lengthening shadows.

“Make a left up here pretty soon.”

“The Mecca for some pool?” he asked. “I’m not sure we’re ready for those sharks in there.”

“Let’s swing by the YMCA,” I told him.

“That old table in there is warped,” Don reminded me. “We should be able to find a game at the Palladium this early.”

“You remember my telling you about the morning I played pool with Abe Davidian at the Y? How this babe walks in off M street and interrupts our game to tell him someone’s been trying to reach him on the phone.”

“Sure,” Don said. “You said it was like Hemingway’s short story ‘The Killers.’”

I’d described Davidian as a guy I’d never seen before, cool-mannered, most likely looking to find a piece of his younger self in this town.

“You know,” I said to Don, “this happens about three months ago, and today I think I see the babe in my elevator.”

“Whoa,” Don replied. “You saw her again today?”

“Turn left up here on Tulare.”

The evening loomed ahead of us in enormous proportion to our young lives. Music rose from this street of movie theaters, ten-cent stores, and fine-clothing stores, office buildings with parlors smelling of air conditioning, English Leather aftershave, and the secret fragrances young women applied to the backs of their necks. We would soon pass the domed courthouse where Abe Davidian, age twenty-eight, was scheduled to testify against his various superiors in a government-driven narcotics trial. In my head, I returned to the day I beat him at 9-Ball at the Y. That’s how I finally put it back then in February whenever I talked about it. That Davidian was a fair stick, but I beat him because of the warped table. We were ready to go again, double or nothing, but the babe took him away from the table.

“One single 32-caliber bullet,” I told Don, “fired from about three feet away.”

Don was with me, his face flushed in the uncooled Merc.

“Down the street from the Y,” I said, “at his mother’s place, broad daylight, Davidian taking a nap after our 9-Ball game.”

We drove on.

Noir, That word.

I told myself that I’d be quicker in the ring with Gloria tomorrow morning when I came to work. *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?* I’d say and inform her how far from being a western the book was.

I leaned back and listened to those strains of music continue to drift by in the warm air. Almost classical, like in the movie, *The Killers*, Burt Lancaster and Ava Gardner, both too beautiful to be true, in the grasp of evil.

This, while the real and the unreal hit me right where I lived and breathed.

