



*The
Gilded Life
of
Matilda
Duplaine*

'...wonderfully
appealing, both
romantic and
moody...reminiscent
of Daphne du
Maurier.'

KIRKUS

ALEX BRUNKHORST

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THE GILDED LIFE OF MATILDA DUPLAINE

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One



The tinkle of an antique servant bell announced my arrival.

The shop was so cluttered with priceless art and centuries-old furniture that maneuvering among them was impossible. I stood in place, hoping someone would come to my rescue. Sixty seconds later, she did. I did not hear the opening or closing of a door, and there was nothing to indicate how she had entered the room. Had she been watching me from behind the ceiling-height Asian room divider she would have seen me grasping for distractions—my cell phone, my reporter’s notebook, a feigned interest in a chalk drawing that hung on the wall.

Nothing I had read could do Lily Goldman justice. She was in her midfifties, but she could have passed for forty-five. Her eyebrows were tweezed in an arched manner, and her blond hair was expertly coiffed in a tame bouffant that looked as if she had come from a salon. Her face was small and refined save for a prominent nose that belonged on a woman twice her size. It was her most striking feature, one that a less self-confident woman of means would have done away with years ago through plastic surgery.

“May I help you?” Lily asked. Her voice was surprisingly low, and it had a hint of a lady who smoked too much—though I

was certain Lily had never picked up a cigarette in her life. Her breeding was too fine for that.

I discreetly rubbed my right hand on my pant leg, hoping to dry it. I reached over an antique oak writing desk, where my proffered hand hung in the air. She looked at it blankly.

“Yes, I’m Thomas Cleary. I’m a reporter, for the *Times*.”

For the first time she made eye contact, and I thought I detected a slightly favorable response, but then:

“I hate reporters. I never speak to the press,” she said.

“You must be Ms. Goldman.” Phil Rubenstein, my editor, had warned me about Lily Goldman’s disdain for journalists before sending me on this mission. I got the distinct impression he thought it would be fruitless.

She looked away, focusing on a bronze candlestick in the shape of a bird. She rotated the bird one hundred eighty degrees.

“Birds don’t migrate north, they migrate south. It is autumn, after all. This place is such a mess. I need to speak to the staff. Where did you go to school, Mr. Cleary?”

“You can call me Thomas. I went to Harvard.”

“At Harvard I bet they taught you that birds migrate south for the winter, north for the summer.”

“I recall picking up that tidbit at St. Mary’s, my grade school in Milwaukee.”

“A Catholic boy,” she said with a wry smile.

She waited for me to respond, but I didn’t. I was nervous because I was on what I hoped was my big-break assignment. It was my first and only story on the entertainment beat—a short retrospective on Joel Goldman, who had just passed away.

Despite the fact that we were only steps away from one of Los Angeles’s most bustling intersections, it was strangely quiet in Lily’s shop. I had come here straight from the paper, which was alive with phones ringing, keyboards clicking and frantic deadlines being met. Here, there hadn’t been a single phone call, not a single customer. No car had passed. There was a formal

right, light a cigarette and tell Lily Goldman everything—about my mother, who shriveled into a skeleton while I toiled on inconsequential stories thousands of miles away in Los Angeles, a city I hated; about my grade school piano teacher, Sister Cecilia, who whacked my knuckles with an iron ruler; about the kids who used to pick me last for Red Rover.

And I wanted to tell her about Manhattan. What had happened there.

Professor Grandy's Journalism Rule Number One: Never let your subject change the subject.

“Enough about my situation. I apologize for taking so much of your time,” I said. Even as a young boy I had always shunned attention, particularly from strangers, and here I was escorting Lily into the dark corners of my life rather than visiting hers. “I’m very sorry to hear of your father’s passing. We’re doing a piece on him, and I was hoping you could give me a quote or an anecdote, something that will make the reader know him better—something to remember him by.”

“Ah, yes, my father.”

At first that was all she said. I didn’t blame her, because he was that kind of man. Joel Goldman’s story was as legendary and epic as the movies he had brought to the screen. He had grown up in Nazi-occupied Poland, escaped the gas chamber, passed through Ellis Island as a boy with only a nickel in his pocket and within ten years catapulted his way from reading scripts in RKO’s story department to creating one of the big movie studios.

According to Joel Goldman’s former business associates, Joel had been known for his micromanagement, and that was putting it kindly. When he stepped on set—which he did almost daily—he practiced lines with his leading ladies, he whispered in his directors’ ears, he berated craft services for everything from dry strudel to weak coffee. In the age of typewriters, Joel had been known to tear up entire first acts and shred them to the floor while horrified scriptwriters looked on. He scoured

expenses to the penny and had been a ruthless negotiator. As a former studio chairman had anonymously told me over the phone that afternoon, “If Joel Goldman sat across from you and you dropped a penny on the floor, he would pick it up and put it in his own pocket and consider himself the luckier for it.”

My strongest trait as a journalist was not in asking, but in listening. So I waited.

“A hell of a man, my father,” Lily finally said. “The first man to produce a movie that made a hundred million dollars. Can you believe it? He started a movie studio when he was only twenty-eight years old. That’s unimaginable. Nowadays boys your age are pushing mail carts at talent agencies, not winning Academy Awards. That was the golden age of the cinema, of Hollywood. Bogie and Bacall used to come to our house in Cap d’Antibes for tea.”

She smiled at the memory, and then I lost her behind the Asian screen. “Have you been to Antibes?” she called.

“I can’t say I have.”

Lily reemerged. She stared at an imaginary point in the distance through heavily leaded antique glass that distorted the outside garden. “We used to sit on the veranda, watch the boats and sip tea with rum. I know it sounds awful, but it’s the most delightful drink. It was there that Bette Davis auditioned for *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* The sea there is incredible, so green—so different than the sea in Los Angeles.”

“It sounds wonderful,” I said.

“The most exciting time of my life. I often think—well, it sounds silly—but I often think that if we go to Heaven we’ll be allowed to live our lives again, fast-forwarding through the bad times, of course.” She looked away, as if she might have revealed too much to a stranger. “I would go back there. To those times with my father in the South of France. I have no use for Hollywood. I only care for what it bought us.”

She glanced at the notebook, unopened in my hand. I hadn’t

written a thing. It might have been nerves, or maybe Lily's personal memories were like coins she had dropped to the ground by accident. Unlike her father, I could not pick them up while she was steps away from me. It would be stealing.

"Is that the sort of thing you're looking for?" she asked.

"What?"

"The quote."

"Yes, that's perfect." I scribbled to catch up.

"I figured as much. Intimacy—it's what we're all looking for."

She focused squarely on me again, this time homing in on my clothes. I had picked up the shirt several years earlier in Cambridge at a discount store and had ironed the shirt and pants myself that morning. The result was deep creasing that was worse than if I had let the dryer have its way with them.

"How does the paper allow its reporters to dress like they just came from a late night of too much drink?"

Lily wore all brown—sweater, knee-length skirt and two-inch pumps. But even in its singular color and simplicity the outfit bled money. The ensemble brought to mind a Parisian tailor on hands and knees with pins in her teeth. The only pizzazz in the outfit was a substantial ivory necklace. I had only known Lily for a few minutes, but it already made sense. Diamonds could still be bought on the open market; elephant tusks could not.

Lily made a small adjustment to my collar, and her hands rested on my upper spine. It had been a long time since a woman had touched me, and I tightened.

As a reporter I was trained to see the tiniest of clues—those fragments and fingerprints others could only see under a microscope. There was, at that moment, a brief spark in Lily's green eyes. And then, just as quickly as her eyes bloomed, they withered and went almost black.

I had thought that Lily had been the one to bare her soul in this interview, but instead she had set the course so I would be the subject who revealed too much.

“You’re a very handsome young man. Don’t let poor clothing choices get in the way of that,” she said, before calling out to the other room, “Ethan, come here.”

A few seconds later a slight man around my age entered through the French doors in the back.

“Yes, Ms. Goldman.” He spoke in little more than a whisper, and if his slim-fitting attire was off-the-rack it was off an expensive one.

“Thomas here is going to be attending dinner this evening. Please arrange with Kurt to pick him up.”

“Thank you for the invitation,” I interjected. “But I have a deadline, and I’m not exactly the fastest typist.”

“That’s one thing you’d think the nuns would have done right,” Lily said. “It’s a fabulous group—some of the guests worked with my father and are quite newsworthy in their own rights. I promise you won’t be disappointed.”

In truth, I generally would have forgone a dinner party invitation, but if there was any opportunity for this dinner to beef up my story on Joel Goldman I knew I had to attend. I gave Ethan my address in Silver Lake, an area on the east side of Los Angeles known as a bastion for artists—all of them hipper than I. Ethan arranged for me to be picked up at seven o’clock sharp.

“Good. It’s decided, then,” Lily said. “Thomas, I’ll see you soon. Ethan, make sure everything goes smoothly.”

Lily would soon disappear behind the Asian screen, but just before she did, she turned around and set her eyes on me one more time.

“Once again, I’m sorry about your mother, Thomas. You must be terribly lonely.”

Before I could respond, Lily had vanished among the antiques.



Two



And so that was how it began. Simply, without the fanfare one comes to expect from an evening that turns life's course from left to right. I called Phil Rubenstein to let him know I would be late with the story. Rubenstein hated slipped deadlines, but once I informed him that I would be joining Lily and a “news-worthy” cast for dinner, he let this one slide a few hours to accommodate the extra research. He then shocked me by changing the story from a one-column to two.

I had only one sport coat—a sales-rack special from a big-and-tall store in Milwaukee. I was tall and broad in the way Midwestern Germanic men are, but I was not big enough to fill out the coat properly, and its fit had always been loose. I was hoping Lily wouldn't notice. I splashed on some aftershave I had got for college graduation, and I slid my notebook and tape recorder into my jacket's interior pocket.

At precisely seven o'clock, my building's downstairs buzzer rang. An Asian man of about fifty, with an expression stern as his handshake, stood at the door.

“I'm Kurt,” he said in the same manner one might use to greet a girl not attractive enough to sleep with.

“I'm Thomas, from the *Times*.” I added that last part as an afterthought, as if it somehow legitimized me.

Kurt opened the back door of a silver Mercedes sedan and I slid in. It smelled of new leather. I suspected Lily was the type of woman whose cars always smelled of new leather. An Evian water and, coincidentally or not, today's *Los Angeles Times* rested in the seat pocket. I opened the paper to the Local section. My one-column article on the proposed 405 Freeway expansion was on page three.

I put the paper back in the seat pocket as we headed west down Sunset Boulevard, toward the sea, as Lily Goldman had called it. I had never been driven by a private driver before and I didn't know if I was meant to make conversation or sit in silence. I decided to take Kurt's cue. He didn't address me once during the hour-long journey; he listened to classical music on the radio and never glanced into the rearview mirror unless it was to change lanes.

Finally, after our long sinuous trip across town, Kurt put on his blinker, preparing for a sharp right into a narrow road that traveled between colossal white walls. A filigree black-iron signpost announced where we were going. The words *Bel-Air* lit up the twilight in a curious shade of blue-white, the color of an ice-skating rink. The words were written in an old-fashioned glitzy font embellished with curlicues and arcs. It was a font from the days when more meant more.

Bel-Air wasn't gated, as some Los Angeles communities were. Instead, it was simply known as a place that commoners like me didn't visit.

We took a soft left and then a sharp right, and then we drove through the winding hills. I opened the tinted window halfway. We were a mere thirteen miles away from my apartment, but the air felt as if it had rolled in from another lifetime. It was foggy and cool, and it smelled of smoke from real chimneys, of lawns freshly cut, of hedges just pruned and of autumn-blooming flowers. Silver Lake reeked of the pavement and the people who slept on it.

The few street signs I made out from the window had regal

names, and if you were looking from the street you would think there were no houses here, only thirty-foot hedges, iron gates and video cameras. The tight streets, two-acre parcels and light traffic had the makings of a neighborhood, but there were no sidewalks. From what I could tell, people here didn't borrow sugar—they sent their drivers to the store for it.

Flowers hung from heavy vines and wept into the narrow streets, squeezing them even tighter. We didn't have foliage like this in the rest of Los Angeles, and I wondered if the flowers were indigenous to only these six square miles. Perhaps the rain here was different, or maybe even the sun preferred Bel-Air. I reached out my window, and I plucked one of the dew-swept flowers off its vine, allowing it to wither between my thumb and index finger before placing it in my interior jacket pocket beside my tape recorder.

Even as a little boy I had always been fascinated by wealth. I grew up in a working-class family, and while my teenage friends were content playing in the streets in Milwaukee's rough inner city, I chose my running path along Lake Michigan, where behemoth mansions reminded one of another era, an era when the industry of the Midwest made millionaires. I dreamed of living in those manors with owners who didn't have a care in the world. At fifteen, when it came time for employment, I eschewed fast food or gas stations. Instead, I worked for an older, wealthy gentleman by the name of Mr. Wayne. I had always been mechanically inclined, so in the evenings my head would be bent over the guts of his expensive hot-rod collection bringing dead cars back to life. In summers, I was a golf caddy at Milwaukee's most expensive country club, even though it required multiple bus transfers to get to work. And then at Harvard, I was surrounded by wealth unimaginable for a boy from the working class of the heartland. For the first time in my life, money seemed accessible, something I could get. All I had to do was work in the world of investments, as most of my college bud-

dies had done. When it came down to it, though, I had chosen a different path—one that would keep me firmly in the lot of the middle class for the rest of my life.

Old iron gates opened. We hadn't announced ourselves, but tiny video cameras blinked red in the eyes of the stone lions.

The steep, narrow driveway ended at a cobblestone motor court with an ornate fountain depicting sea nymphs at play. Prehistoric-looking foliage surrounded an old stone Spanish-style mansion. The cacti were ten feet tall and blue lights illuminated trees with spiky leaves and exotic flowers.

I tapped the front door's heavy knocker. I heard the clackety-clack of heels on a tile floor and the door opened. A house cat with spots like a leopard sprinted across the foyer.

The woman was in her late thirties and dressed for a rococo costume party, not an intimate dinner. Her outfit featured a tortoise-and-feather headpiece, white fur shawl, snakeskin pants so tight they might have been painted on and six-inch ostrich heels. I thought of Lily's ivory necklace. I wondered if wearing endangered species was a status symbol in all of Los Angeles's social stratosphere or just this specific circle of it.

"You must be Thomas. Come in. You're pale. It looks like you could use a drink. And a trip to Tahiti. But we can take care of that later."

We stood in a two-story entry the size of a ballroom. Red wax candles served as wall sconces and the only man-made light came from an overhead chandelier adorned with dragons and crystals. Juliet balconies above us were empty, but I got the sense that during grander parties violinists played there and during more intimate ones men and women did.

"Everyone, this is Thomas, Lily's friend," the woman who answered the door said, leading me from the foyer to a smaller room.

She did not bother introducing herself, but her manner was as theatrical as her attire and her words echoed on the stone. The four other people in the room hushed on cue, and I was

embarrassed by their silence, their undeserved stares. In order to divert my eyes, I took in the room's zebra chairs, antlered sconces and mirrored ceilings, wondering if I had fallen down the rabbit hole.

"Thomas, darling, what are you drinking?" the oddly dressed woman asked.

I scanned the group with the corners of my eyes. There was no Lily. My heart quickened, and I was so nervous I briefly and irrationally thought that I had shown up to the wrong party.

"Sweetheart. Is everything okay?" the woman pressed me, after her question had gone unanswered.

She stood beside the type of formal mirrored bar you would've found in a 1920s Art Deco speakeasy in Manhattan. There were no off-the-shelf bottles; liquor was kept in heavy crystal decanters. Sterling silver-framed snapshots surrounded the crystal on all sides. It was then that I realized Lily Goldman had invited me to a dinner party at someone else's house.

I paused for a moment. I needed to choose a drink that was both elegant and available in one of those anonymous bottles. I thought of my ex-girlfriend—she had been a girl who would have known what to order in a scene like this. A gimlet. That had been her drink of choice.

"Yes. Sorry. A gimlet, please. On the rocks."

"A gimlet—how old-fashioned and moneyed of you. I'll have to remember that," she said. "I love anything old-fashioned. Right, George?"

"And moneyed, which is the only reason you fell in love with me," George said with a glint in his eye, as if he knew it was true but was also flattered by it.

"Fell in love maybe, but stayed in love no. California's a community property state. Even half your money would've kept me in couture and a G5," she said as she squeezed three slices of lime into the drink she had prepared.

George walked over and preemptively sandwiched my hand

in both of his. His squeeze was more appropriate for a long-lost high school chum than a random dinner-party crasher, and I immediately liked him for it.

“George Bloom. My wife, Emma, has many wonderful traits—I love her dearly—but introductions aren’t one of them. Welcome to our humble abode.”

So this was why Rubenstein had so easily moved my deadline.

Everyone knew George Bloom as the most powerful man in the music business. He grinned, and his large-toothed smile was as wide as his jaw was formidable. It was easy to imagine him bestowing that same charming grin on musicians he wanted to sign to his record label—with great success. Unlike his wife, whose outfit must have been the result of vintage binge shopping and weeks of planning, George wore a golf shirt and khakis more appropriate for a round of links than a dinner party. I was sure his casual attire was neither picked nor approved by Emma, so George’s message was clear: he was boss of this castle.

“Nice to meet you,” I said. “Thanks for having me.”

“It’s our pleasure, truly. Lily’s on her way. In the meantime, come in. Meet the rest of the group.”

George placed his hand on my back, nudging me deeper into the drawing room.

A gimlet magically appeared in my hand, and I studied it, not knowing if I was supposed to wait for a toast. George saw my hesitation. His eyes said, “Go ahead, drink, young man.”

I took a hurried sip of my drink. In the corner, I caught a glimpse of David Duplaine, undisputedly Hollywood’s most powerful man. He leaned back in his chair, tips of his fingers together so his hands formed a pyramid, his legs crossed. I diverted my eyes from his and focused on the sofa.

“Carole, Charles, David...everyone, this is Thomas. Thomas is a close friend of Lily’s.”

Carole Partridge was one of the most famous actresses in the world, and here she was, within ten feet of me, lounging on a

purple velvet sofa, stroking the leopard cat. She balanced herself on a bony elbow and a curvy hip, and her pale bare feet were the equivalent of George's golf shirt—proof she was important enough to do whatever she damn well pleased.

Reality and fantasy briefly merged and I felt as if I was looking at Carole on-screen from the first row in a movie theater. Her retro-hourglass figure was the stuff of *Playboy*. Her arms and legs were lean and muscular. Her hazel eyes were sleepy in a seductive way, and her flawless, milky-white skin seemed as if it belonged in a black-and-white film—Technicolor, or real life, made it appear almost fake.

“Would you like me to get up?” Carole asked in a bored manner, as if after three minutes in the room my presence was already growing old.

“Not necessary,” I declared.

Carole's husband, Charles, stood up in her stead.

“Thomas, nice to meet you,” Charles said. “Sit down, join us. We were thrilled when Lily said she invited you. We need some new blood around here.”

Charles had the general aura of someone for whom work had always been optional. His speech was tinted with a rarified East Coast accent that was most likely cultivated with lacrosse buddies at Choate or a place like it. At Harvard I knew plenty of guys who were born into a lifetime of financial security, and they, like Charles, always seemed to have a general calm about them, as if their money was a superpower.

“Thanks,” I said, settling into a chair and taking a long sip of my gimlet.

“Lily tells us you're a reporter,” George said.

“That's correct.” I focused intensely on my drink, experiencing a bit of stage fright. At the mention of the word *reporter* the tape recorder felt heavier in my interior pocket, reminding me of my second-class and gauche life.

“A friend of mine—may he rest in peace—always said that

the difference between journalists and reporters is that journalists lie, reporters just make shit up,” George said.

“In that case I’m a journalist. I’ve never had a good imagination. If I did I would have been a novelist or written for the movies,” I replied.

“Charles just wrote a screenplay DreamWorks bought for seven figures,” George said genially. There was a ring of pride in his voice.

Something about George reminded me of Mr. Wayne, the gentleman with the hot-rod collection I had worked for in high school. They both oozed charm and seemed inclined to grab your hand, squeeze it and escort you to that glorious and splendid place where they had ended up.

Charles smiled good-naturedly. “The stock market was flat so I was bored. I copied one of Spielberg’s movies scene by scene, inserting different names and monsters.”

There was a hearty round of laughs from the group.

Though I had only just met Charles, I could already imagine him alone in a plush home office, sitting at an old-fashioned typewriter, a heavy glass of Macallan 21 beside him, and the rest of the bottle close enough to be in eyesight but too far for a refill. The television on the wall would be paused on a scene from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

I cast a sideways glance at Carole. Her fingertips were so deeply burrowed in the leopard cat’s neck folds they disappeared to the knuckle. She hadn’t joined the group in laughter, hadn’t cracked a smile.

“How did you meet Lily, Thomas?” Carole was thirty-eight, but her voice was forty-eight and smooth as cognac. It was more of a purr than a voice.

“I’m doing a story on her father.”

The question didn’t seem like small talk, and I hoped I answered correctly. I had never been in the close presence of some-

one so famous, and I had yet to find that gray area between feigned ignorance and asking for an autograph.

“A great man, Joel Goldman,” Emma said, as she adjusted a feather in her hair and gave a peripheral glance to her husband. “George did the music for many of Joel’s films. Right, love?”

“David and I both worked for him. Were it not for Joel we wouldn’t be sitting here, or it would have had to happen some other way.”

An imaginary breeze rolled in. David Duplaine was still sitting, silently, in the corner, and now the group shifted their attention his way. Even the leopard cat gave a lazy glance in David’s direction before settling back under Carole’s palm.

David Duplaine was the chairman of a movie studio—the pinnacle of off-camera stardom in Los Angeles. But that wasn’t all. In addition to producing many of the world’s top-grossing movies, David had grown the studio’s subsidiary television network from infancy to its presently dominant state. He was now in the process of gobbling up major market newspapers and technology companies to create a media empire across all platforms. David was the most powerful media titan in the world.

My job at the *Times* wasn’t as much writing as it was reading—people. And I knew from the moment I saw him that David Duplaine would be a difficult man to read.

I avoided eye contact at first, homing in on his sneakers, which in any other city would be too young for a man of fifty. He wore a white T-shirt that might have been Hanes or Gucci but whatever the case fit perfectly. He was small of stature and build, and his head was shaved in the manner fashionable for men who are balding. His brown eyes were heavily lidded and bored looking, his eyebrows lively and interested and his strong nose as crooked as if it had survived a few street fights along the way. Yet the combination came together to form someone who was quite interesting looking and, in fact, he was always included in eligible-bachelor lists throughout the globe.

David hadn't bothered to acknowledge me in any manner, but I felt his presence the way a gazelle feels a cheetah in the depths of night on the plains—he was there, waiting, and whatever my next move was it wouldn't matter.

"Hello, everyone," announced a woman's voice.

I felt an extraordinary sense of relief when I saw Lily in the doorway. She was draped in black silk and her ivory necklace was gone in favor of wide cuffs that covered half her forearms in gold webs of pearls and emeralds.

"Lily!" Emma stood up and handed Lily a drink. "How are you, sweetheart? Those cuffs... I hate you for them."

"Oh these—they're terribly old and I never think to wear them. You can have them, in fact. I'll messenger them to you tomorrow." Lily smiled at me. "Most important, has everyone met Thomas?"

"Yes, yes. He's lovely, absolutely lovely. And *so* good-looking," Emma said, as if I weren't in earshot. "Now let's eat. I'm bloody famished."

We passed through an arch to a saffron-colored formal dining room prepped to comfortably seat seven, though it could do the same for forty if larger-scale entertaining were in order. The first thing I noticed were the flowers—gothic, untamed arrangements of twigs, branches, berries and deeply colored, oversize, drooping roses.

The rectangular table was set with heavy gold plates, glass goblets and a tall candelabra that held so many candles the room seemed on fire. Emma was not one for fine china and dainty centerpieces.

I almost made the mistake of sitting down before seeing the place card with my name written in a medieval font.

"Thomas, you're sitting next to me. I never seat couples beside each other. I figure we have enough time together as it is. Not that I don't love my husband, because I do. Ridiculously so." Emma blew George an air-kiss as she sat down at the head of the table.

Emma sat to my left, Carole my right. While the first course was served, my presence was still new and exciting. Lily and Emma shelled me with rapid-fire questions—“Do tell. What was it like to grow up in a town like Milwaukee?”—and Charles and George interjected here and there. They dropped plenty of names—movie stars, studio heads, political figures. Just hearing those names gave me a rush. I felt as if I was a part of it. Had I chosen to whip out my notebook or betray confidences, I would have had enough fodder for ten juicy stories. Instead I kept quiet, hoping an off-the-record meal would create more on-the-record content later.

The novelty of a stranger at the table had grown thin by the time we reached the entrée, and as I ate my Alaskan salmon theatrically drizzled with an exotic sauce and accompanied by a vegetable I didn't recognize, I was generally ignored.

I didn't mind being left out—situations like this were exactly why I had become a reporter in the first place. Although I could've chosen more lucrative occupations to be sure, my fascination with people had led me to the world of journalism. It was my job to observe behavior and collect information. For example, over the span of entrée to dessert wine, I noticed that Emma picked up a call from someone she later called her “stylist” and I saw George shoot his wife a “Don't be rude” look when she did so. It was obvious that Lily didn't care for Emma's choice of heavy goblets by the way she lifted her glass a quarter inch off the table and then immediately put it back down, as if the sip of wine wasn't worth the exertion. Charles and George seemed to be best friends—this was clear by the way they knew the minutiae of each other's lives. Charles, for example, asked about the weekly *Billboard* numbers for one of George's albums, and George in turn expressed concern for Charles's pet pigeon that had mysteriously disappeared three mornings earlier.

Despite the odd pigeon comment, if I were to home in on

the two most interesting characters at the table it would have been Carole and David. I say this because introverted people intrigue me. I always think they have something to hide or, at the very least, want people to believe they do. It was too early for me to say if this was the case here, but there was something about these two that made me want to know more.

I watched each of them closely, searching for clues. In the span of an entire dinner there was only one: just after our main course, David's cell phone vibrated, indicating a text message. He pulled out his phone and glanced at it. Carole watched discreetly, and then she made eye contact with him.

"Is everything okay?" Carole asked, voice low but concerned.

"Work thing," David responded. "Never sleeps."

"How was your dinner, Thomas?" Charles asked, changing the subject.

"Delicious. You're a wonderful cook, Emma."

"I can't take credit for it. But I can take credit for hiring the chef. Cordon Bleu, Paris. I went there personally and dipped my spoon into all of their kettles. I liked Francois's the best."

Charles raised his glass in toast and everyone went back to their side conversations. The dessert wine went on for another half hour or so, and I found myself staring through a large picture window at a majestic date palm covered in blue lights. That tree had to be a hundred years old. I looked at the lights intently until they blurred together into a filmy blue that saturated the air. To my right, I noticed Carole gazed at the same blue air. She seemed lost in it. When she finally tore her eyes away, she stood up from the table. She took her drink with her and never returned to the room.

Twenty minutes later the group congregated for a postdinner brandy in what Emma called "the card room." I had never been to a house with a room dedicated to cards before, but it made sense since Emma had specifically said that she loved "anything

old-fashioned,” and cards would have certainly fallen into that category.

The glass room was lined in lattice more suitable for the outdoors than an interior space, and its plants had been allowed to run wild. Two oversize square tables were illuminated by massive pagoda-shaped chandeliers, their crystals generously casting off light.

Admittedly, I had never been a card guy—in fact, I didn’t even know how to play simple games like bridge or poker—so I excused myself to make a phone call, but instead slipped outside to have a stealth cigarette, a habit I had picked up a few years earlier and never quit. I settled into a lounge chair next to a grass-bordered body of water that resembled a swamp. Its water was green and murky and my eye caught an occasional minnow swimming beneath its lily pads. Were it not for the diving board at the northwest end, I wouldn’t have even known it was a swimmable pool.

I lit a match and put it to the tip of my cigarette. What a night it had been. I was here in Bel-Air with some of the most important people in a city full of important people. I was so high I never wanted to come down. I knew Lily’s motive for the invitation, and it had nothing to do with feeding a sweet Midwestern kid a home-cooked meal. Over *crème brûlée*, Lily had insisted everyone at the table give me quotes about her father. She was no fool, and she knew that favorable quotes from some of the most important people in the industry carried heavy weight.

But then I reflected on a scene from that afternoon—of Lily’s fingers on my neck. I wondered if there had been some other reason for Lily’s invitation.

I took a puff of my cigarette. I watched its golden tip light the clear, starry Bel-Air sky. We were in the middle of the city, but the quiet sky belonged in a countryside somewhere. It made me feel vaguely existential, as if above and beyond us there was

nothing—nothing to hope for, no afterlife, nothing to make us choose one course of action over another.

The leopard cat jumped onto my lap and snapped me out of my reverie. Just then I heard a slight rustle from a dark spot in the corner of the property.

I saw a single shadow, but then it divided in half—into two separate shadows. The gestures of their hands and their body contact indicated a familiarity, and I was certain they were two of the dinner guests who had slipped outside for a side conversation. But despite my journalist's curiosity, I instinctually turned away. I had always felt uncomfortable intruding on others' privacy, so I looked at the swimming pool instead. An orange minnow slithered against the pool's muddy edge, and the leopard cat's eyes grew large, but he didn't pounce.

Then, as quickly as they had appeared, the shadows were gone.

I finished my cigarette and headed back into the house.

"Wanna come in, big guy?" I asked the leopard cat, whose eyes shone like green lights. I held the door open for him, but he darted away into the deep black night.

I found the card room on my second try. I opened the huge wooden doors, expecting to find two of the dinner guests absent. They were all there, though, engaged in a six-person game of poker. I shouldn't have finished the cigarette.

"Thomas, where did you disappear to?" Lily said.

"I fold." Carole threw in her cards.

"I fold," George repeated.

"The swimming pool," I said.

"Would you like to borrow a bathing suit?" Emma asked.

"We usually swim in the buff, but we have extras in the pool house."

"No, thank you. I went outside for a cigarette."

"I fold," David said.

"You're so silly, Thomas." Emma presented me with a gold ashtray in the shape of a lion. "I bought this at the Duquette sale

and I have been absolutely *dying* to use it. Besides, smoke makes the house feel lived-in. That was my goal with all this—” She spread her arms out wide. “Can’t you tell?”

I almost started to laugh, but then caught the seriousness in her eyes.

“Well, you’ve done a good job of it,” I said, lifting a brandy—a drink I hated—in toast.

Emma smiled before returning to her card game. There was nothing about this mansion that would indicate Emma Bloom’s desire to make it feel lived-in—not the cold stone floors that echoed conversation, not the swampy swimming pool, nor the stiff-backed zebra-covered chairs in the drawing room.

I sat on the outskirts of the game, watching as Emma shuffled with the expertise of a Vegas casino dealer. I thought again of the shadows outside, of Carole and David’s exchange at dinner. Sure, I was here to pull some quotes on the recently departed Joel Goldman. But something told me the real story was much bigger and more far-reaching than that.

Professor Grandy’s Journalism Rule Number Two: The dead are only interesting in the context of the lives they left behind.

“I hope you don’t mind—we’re going to drop David off. His driver fell ill unexpectedly, poor thing,” Lily said, as Kurt helped her into her champagne mink shrug, which seemed too warm for the weather. “He only lives around the corner. It won’t be much out of our way.”

“Of course,” I said.

Kurt opened the car doors for us. David sat in the front, Lily and I in the back.

While Kurt had listened to classical music on our long drive, now the station was tuned to the radio affiliate of David’s cable news network.

It was only a block away, and we drove it in silence. The radio commentator was the only one who spoke. He pontificated, with

left-wing conviction, about the upcoming presidential election. In the Midwest this one block would have been a nice after-dinner walk, but there were no pedestrians in Bel-Air. The streets were too narrow and the people too rich for that.

We took one turn before stopping in front of an impressive barricade of palatial gray iron gates. They were simple and unadorned, and they opened like magic.

We passed through the gates into the grandest estate I had ever seen. We had just come from a property so magnificent it took my breath away, but compared to David's estate, Emma and George's felt humble. The long driveway meandered through acres of gently rolling hills sparsely dotted with trees. At the end of the driveway was a grand old Palladian manse. The first floor was glowing. Upstairs, only one room was lit, its curtain closed.

My first reaction was to notice how impersonal David's estate seemed. The regal house was surrounded by carefully pruned formal gardens and thirty-foot hedges.

We stopped in the octagonal motor court.

"Thanks for the ride, Kurt," David said. "Lily, I'll call you in the morning." He looked at me intensely, with that incongruous combination of bored eyes and lively eyebrows. I was captivated. "And, Thomas—" David let the name sit by itself for a moment. "I look forward to reading the article on Joel. And I wish you the best of luck at the *Times*."

They were the first words David had said to me all night.

A valet attendant in his midtwenties dressed in starched whites opened David's door for him.

"Welcome home, Mr. Duplaine," he said.

Before I could say thank-you or good-night, the valet had already closed David's door behind him. Kurt turned off the radio. I watched through the tinted glass as David was briskly escorted through the front door by a butler. Soon after, the upstairs light went dark.

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