

Elysian Fields

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Steps away from the newsstand, the *Times* under my arm, I was heading into The Pantry for breakfast when I noticed a red piece of paper under my windshield wiper. No writing. I pocketed it.

Like every other place in the country, winter visited Los Angeles in December. If the temperature dipped to sixty degrees, people shivered in the sunlight and if it dropped to fifty or lower and drizzled, people forgot how to drive in the rain. On this dark winter morning, the streets were wet, and everybody was cold and moody about something, whether it was not enough green in the bank, enough love at home, or enough of everything else because the country was at war.

The piece of paper between the blade and glass was red, a homicide, and a victim nobody cared about. It was a signal to make the phone call. I went inside the joint, my back to 9th and Figueroa.

I closed the accordion door, put my copy of the *Times* down on the small shelf below the phone. I read the motto in the upper left corner, while I fished for coins. ALL THE NEWS ALL THE TIME described the city and its people. Nobody had time for a comma. I gave the operator the exchange and she named the price.

Like this luncheonette, crooked was always cooking. I spotted the brooding cop at the counter. I'd need more than Bromo-Seltzer to cure the headache he wanted to give me. I'd seen him before, as muscle for Kynette, who was a real speck of dirt. Judge Fletcher Bowron was appointed to look into corruption between the Mayor's Office and the Police Department. His investigation led to Mayor Frank Shaw being recalled and replaced, Shaw's brother and bagman being charged with graft, and Captain Earl Kynette of the Intelligence Squad being convicted of the attempted murder of investigator Harry Raymond. Instrumental in the investigation of the bombing of Raymond's car was a Captain Parker who everyone swore would make chief one day.

His was the voice in my ear.

"Sixteen-year old male. Mexican. Body was found in Elysian Park. Parents reside in Boyle Heights and reported him missing three days ago. Pending official confirmation at the morgue, the brother identified the body from a photo. Get over to Elysian before the stretchers do, and watch yourself on this one. The brother tried to unionize Signal Hill."

He gave me a name and two addresses. You were on the right side of the street when the assignment came from a top cop inside the station house, and you saw beat blues steaming your way.

As I opened the door, the brooding cop charged in for double-occupancy. I pivoted and shoved him inside the booth, slammed the door shut, and borrowed the broom from the kid sweeping the floor. I slid the stick through the looped handle to trap him inside. I left him to pound wood and yell obscenities from behind the glass. The morning crowd ignored us, disappointed that bacon, butter, and sugar had been rationed. I walked out, leaving them to enjoy their coffee and cigarettes.

Breakfast was supposed to be the most important meal of the day, and this crooked cop and some murdered kid made me forget it and my copy of the *Times*.

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I hopped into my boiler and pressed my foot on the starter. Elysian Valley is where frogs sang along the soft edges of the LA River, with the Hollywood sign and the San Gabriel mountains within sight. Elysian Park played a cameo in the '32 Olympics and now some lowlife killed a kid and left the body near contaminated water.

My car eased into an imaginary parking spot. I lifted my lid after I exited the vehicle. The detective in the distance raised his fedora. We knew each other but we never used names because it meant less paperwork for him on the case.

I crouched down, remembering Elysian Fields was the afterlife in Greek mythology for heroes. I looked at the body. Another Angeleno was found gazing up at the sky; this time he was as dead as all the promises and stardust in this town. The detective aired out the facts for me.

“Cause of death is likely blunt force trauma to the head. Footprints in close proximity to the corpse suggest two men. I’m confident impressions from all the foot traffic will match the bruises on the body. Hell of a way to go, don’t ya think? Beaten and stomped to death, left for night crawlers, and then the indignity.”

The insult the detective referred to was that the deceased had been stripped down to his skivvies. Save the boxers he was wearing, he was battered and bruised, eyes swollen shut, the face distorted and gnawed at by blowflies, critters, and maggots. A real nightmare for any parent to have to see on the tray. No mortuary arts and sciences could undo all that violence, and that’s exactly what the killers intended. They could’ve tossed him into the drink, but didn’t.

I listened to the rest of the man’s report.

“This young man was dragged out here for the beatdown and left for dead.”

This young man bestowed a modicum of respect. I looked again. The kid’s body advertised no tattoos, no collapsed veins to suggest drug use. He exhibited all the signs of good living, a righteous life in accordance with the crucifix on a gold chain around his neck. I listened to the detective.

“No tire marks found yet, but that’s not to say they didn’t park nearby and force him to leg it down here. Lord knows where his clothes are. Probably disposed of there or over there.”

The detective pointed to the river and then a brewery in the distance where smoke whispered out of a chimney. I remained crouched, curious about the fingertips. Stained red—and it wasn’t from blood, his or another’s. An unnatural shade of red.

I stood up and surveyed the territory. Frogtown was a transient community for wildlife, human or otherwise. A lot of living and dying happened here among the willows and tall grass, next to the river.

The detective gave me the greenlight to visit Boyle Heights. The parents, he said, already knew someone from the department was coming and he’d let them know I would be in plainclothes. Nobody liked this part of an investigation, not even hardened cops. A day didn’t go by without seeing the Western Union man or a pair of servicemen on a doorstep with dreadful news about a loved one from the war in Europe or the Pacific.

While driving I was reminded again how LA was obsessed with the hereafter. I passed a billboard for a clairvoyant. An oversized marquee hawked consultations on life and love. Another faker boasted of having doctorates in spirituality and psychology; the word ‘Reverend’ preceded his name, alphabet soup for degrees after it. Everybody had a scheme or a scam to lighten the hearts and wallets of the lonely and desperate.

Boyle Heights was, and is, the Ellis Island of the West Coast. Jews lined Brooklyn and Soto Avenues with delis, small businesses, and a synagogue within walking distance of their homes. The police and watch-groups kept vigil on these sons and daughters of Abraham—and kept an even tighter grip on bats, believing that Boyle Heights was infested with communists and socialists. Dirty, unpatriotic subversives. Enthusiasm died down among Reds and other intellectuals after Stalin and Hitler formed their pact.

Germans, Italians, and Russians had a presence in the neighborhood, the Japanese had as well before Roosevelt shoved them into “relocation centers.” Banks showed up faster than the day’s mail and seized their properties. The same finance men reappraised the Heights and red-lined it as too risky for the federal home-loan program. The dream of owning a house disappeared overnight. Jews fled to Fairfax, Mexicans filled the void in the labor force as the Japanese went bye-bye into shantytowns behind barbed wire, and Boyle Heights was divided into the moderately affluent Heights and a struggling but dignified Flats.

As my car wobbled down the unpaved driveway, a hand in the front window of the house swept the curtain and let it swing back into place. I tramped though grass slick from last night’s rain. I rapped the wood and the screen door rattled with each knock. A small tired man opened the door and beckoned me inside.

I wiped my feet on the mat and took off my hat. “Mr. Hernández, I presume.”

“*Bienvenido*. Welcome.”

Husband and wife, father and mother, stood in front of me in a small parlor. Their other son lingered behind them. I pinned the kid's age around nineteen. I offered my condolences, first in Spanish and then in English.

"My wife and I plan to identify Miguel later today. We were told you were coming and the man on the phone told us to wait for you."

"*Gracias*. I'll do my best to keep this brief. I have some questions."

Mr. Hernández directed me to a chair. His chair. I understood this as the equivalent to sitting at the head of the family table.

Every family handled grief differently. She was tall, regal in a black mourning dress, a handsome woman despite the swollen eyes from crying. Her husband walked as slowly as an altar boy behind the priest during high mass. Their son, who had introduced himself as José, looked as if he hadn't slept the three days since his brother Miguel disappeared.

As I sat, Mrs. Hernández insisted on stepping to the kitchen to make me a plate of food. I read her hospitality as deference to the men of the household, or that she simply didn't want to hear this conversation. Nobody said it, but the youngest in most families is the favorite child.

Miguel had attended Roosevelt High. His class, his father told me, had been decimated and reduced to less than half because of the Japanese internment. Mr. Hernández shook his head. "Good hard-working people and Americans, like you and me. I don't understand this president."

Miguel was the good-looking kid in the framed picture he showed me. I stood up when Mrs. Hernández returned with a plate of *memelas* and a tall glass of cold water. She explained that her masa dough was a family recipe in Oaxaca. I thanked her and she disappeared again.

"Had your son experienced any troubles, sir?"

Both father and son shook their heads. They knew I was referring to prejudices against Mexicans.

"Any interest in him, say from the 38th Street gang? Perhaps he refused to pay protection money? Anything like that?"

Again, they said no without saying it.

"May I ask what kind of clothes your son wore? His sense of fashion." The father let out a sigh. "He'd wear a zoot suit, but only on weekends, like the night he didn't come home. My wife and I hated it, because it's asking for trouble. My son was no *pachucho*."

"A lot of kids wear zoot suits, Mr. Hernández, and it doesn't mean he was a punk. Every generation finds a way to rebel. Some kids today wear clothes to make themselves look older and sophisticated, so the zoot suit—"

"It's what *cholos* wear." His tone had a decisive and dismissive edge to it.

I wasn't about to drive down a dead-end street. I'll admit my bias. Zoot suits looked ridiculous, with their bloomer pants pegged mid-calf, over-sized jacket, and the pocket watch on a long chain for an affectation. The look was as comical as Lou Costello in a bathing suit.

I tried a new direction after two quick bites of food. They both mentioned that Miguel liked swing music, also that he frequented dance halls to rumba the night away.

"Did he have a lady friend?" I asked. The looks I received told me that I'd found the off-key note on their small piano in the living room. The father's eyes were reading the floorboards. He was framing his words.

"Any information is helpful, Mr. Hernández? Please."

"I don't want this to sound wrong, but he was seeing a white girl, a rich girl."

"Not from Roosevelt then?"

"God, no. They met each other through José, where he worked. A holiday party."

I looked to the brother. José was dressed in simple slacks, shirt and tie. He'd blend into the background of any black-and-white photograph.

“And where was that, José?”

“Ramsey Petroleum.”

“Weren’t they in the papers years ago for wanting to drill for oil in Elysian Park and downtown?”

The mention of Elysian Park sparked panic in his eyes. Two things outside of bland clothes stood out about José: the Cary Grant hairstyle and that he wasn’t in uniform like most men on the streets. When he turned twenty-one, and if the war was still on, that could all could change; for now, José was aiming for respectability and a decent-paying job behind a desk.

“Yeah, there was a stink in the paper—”

The kid stopped talking when his father glared at him. “Proper English, José.”

“Yes, there was talk in the paper, but the project came to nothing because the development association shut them down. All before my time, though.”

“What do you do at Ramsey Petroleum?” I asked.

“Office stuff. Nothing important. Not like I’m a roughneck, or anything.”

Papa Hernández interrupted again, this time on a note of pride. “My son doesn’t work with his hands. I raised him to strive for better.”

I smiled, as if I understood the imperative that children must surpass their parents, a myth and all that bunk from Horatio Alger, I thought. Nonetheless, I persisted with José.

“You seem to know the company’s history. Familiar with Porcupine Hill? Now there’s a site that’s made a name for itself. Largest producing field in the state, quarter-million barrels a day at one point.”

José blinked. I wolfed the last of the memelas. Nobody but a native of Long Beach called Signal Hill Porcupine Hill. The name came from the proliferation of derricks throughout the town, south of Los Angeles.

“Like I said, I do office work.”

“Right,” I said, setting aside the plate. “Your wife is a fine cook. Thank her for me.” I stood up, folded the napkin and placed it under the water glass as a coaster. “This girl Miguel was seeing. Got a name?”

“Cecilia, but nobody calls her that,” José said.

“What do they call her then?”

“Cissy. Cissy Howard. She lives in Bel-Air.”

“Fancy, and may I ask how serious were they? Steady?”

“They were sweet on each other.”

I thanked Mr. Hernández again and asked to speak with José outside. I told his father I had left my notepad in the car and wanted Cissy’s address. He bought it. When he left with the dish and glass, I put on my hat and asked José to join me.

He put a pork pie hat on his head. The screen door slapped shut behind us. Between the porch and my car, the only sounds between us were underfoot, wet and sticky. One of us was going to talk first, and it wasn’t going to be me.

“You think I had something to do with my brother’s death?”

“Did you?”

“*Usted está loco.*”

“I’m not crazy, and no need to be polite with me, José. A little birdy said you tried to unionize Signal Hill. Hell of a thing to do, admirable even, but also dangerous and crazy. *Loco*, if you ask me.”

“My brother wasn’t involved.”

“I believe you, but here’s the thing. People in the oil racket don’t play nice. Before your time, people killed each other trying to bring water into LA. Now, tell me about Cissy’s old man. What does Mr. Bel-Air do?”

“Real estate.”

“Residential or commercial?”

José had dipped his hands into his pants pockets. His foot toyed with a pebble. He looked down at his little plaything and not at me, which suggested there was more to the star-crossed lovers. Juliet lives, and Romeo didn't die by his own hand.

"Commercial," he said finally. "Why? Is it important?"

"Money is very important, and not just in this town. I'm sure you were a good brother to Miguel. Gave him advice and such. Did he say how Cissy's father felt about him?"

Sensitive subject, I knew, but unavoidable. Some folks who claimed to be liberal didn't like it when it was their kid in a relationship that veered over the color line. Fine for everyone else but not for them, their keeping up with the Joneses, their precious standing in the community, and God forbid their misguided son or daughter having stained children.

"Miguel said he felt as if her dad didn't approve, but he didn't come out and say it."

"The upper crust sharpens their manners, while Florita polishes all the silver and Manuel trims the hedges." I'd delivered a one-two combination. José was speechless for a second.

"They talked, her father and Miguel. Cissy invited him to a social at her home after they met at the office party." He winced as if he'd tasted a lemon. "Miguel went to Bel-Air, dressed in his best. No zoot suit, of course."

"Of course, and?"

"Said everyone treated him as if he were the help, until Cissy shut them all up when she held his hand. Miguel said you could hear the air move in the room. Daddy wasn't too pleased."

"I bet. You said commercial real estate. Does this Mr. Howard perchance have any connections to oil?"

"Do you know how many people invest in oil?"

José had a point. Everyone from housewives to grannies anted up fool's money. In this town girls believed they could be the next starlet if they sat at the counter at Schwab's long enough. Stocks circulated like lottery tickets, offering a tiny percentage of an oil field so small that the eye of the needle was the moon. Suckers paid, suckers played, and some scored while others went broke.

I kicked his pebble away. My gut said José was lobbing easy serves over the net. Maybe, it was because I was too Anglo and gringo. Not Mexican.

"Play straight with me, José."

"I didn't see no badge when you introduced yourself. Are you a cop?"

"I'm the closest thing to justice for your brother. *¿Me entiendes?*"

"Yeah, I understand you," he said, and I stared at him. "Yes, I understand you."

"Better. I asked you if Howard was in with oil. Is he?"

The kid shook his head. "I tried to unionize Signal Hill," he said. "I learned about the working conditions for the oilers at Venice Beach, and other locations throughout southern California." His voice heated up. I could sense the passionate cause here. He said, "Do you know how many derricks and pumpjacks there are in Los Angeles?"

"I'm sure you could tell me, but get to the point, José. Is there a connection between Howard and Ramsey Petroleum, or not?"

"Guys who want to stop unions hire the same help."

"Muscle."

"Yeah, I mean, yes. I had a run-in with two goons once, the same ones Miguel described at a shindig he attended with Cissy. He detailed them down to tiepins, loud neckwear, and pinstripe suits."

"There's something against Howard, but it's an awfully thin connection to oil."

"Not if they showed up at the office for the paycheck."

"Paycheck for what?" I asked.

"Security." José moved in closer, though nobody could hear us. "I got their names and an address for their office from a friend in accounting."

"They have an office?"

"A bar, downtown, near the Hotel Cecil."

José gave me the name of the bar and described the bruisers to me. I recognized the type of citizen. Thugs big on brawn and light on brains who scored high on intimidation and physical damage. Persuasion was a euphemism for their vocation, and these two didn't know how to spell euphemism. Before I climbed into my car, I thanked José and advised him to accompany his parents for the ordeal ahead.

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The Cecil was *the* destination for suicides. Live large and sign out dramatic. Guests had thrown themselves off the roof, swallowed poison, and drunk a bottle of champagne for their sayonara to the failed life. The bar I sought was empty steps away from the notorious hotel.

I parked and visited the trunk, swapped the suit jacket for a long coat, and grabbed the ax handle. The coat hid the hickory stick. Stronger than birch or maple, hickory absorbs the shock and fatigues the arms less when you're swinging the bat like Enos Slaughter.

The place was dark as a coal mine. A drunk for a canary was sleeping it off at a table. The bar was long as a Viking ship, an old man at the helm. He was employed not to see well and to hear less. The two thugs ahead of me couldn't see what I was carrying. I had a service revolver on me, too, but I wanted the outcome to be a trip to County General and not the coroner.

The articulate one in the pair stood up and spoke, "Nice hat."

"Why thanks, Sluggo. The two of you enjoy hammering Hernández?"

The tough guy asked his partner, "What did he call me?"

"Sluggo Smith from the comic strip *Nancy*," his pal answered and faced me. He opened his coat to display the hardware, a pistol on each hip. "Hernández, wasn't he that union pain in the ass?"

"Right name, wrong kid," I answered and swung the hickory upwards into his groin, hard. He doubled over and I ironed out his shoulder blades for good posture. His dull friend fared no better, despite the southpaw swing. He'd be eating his meals through a straw when he woke up. I dragged both lugs to a bar stool and handcuffed them to the steel footrest.

I walked over to the barkeep. "Where's the phone, pops?"

He pointed to the rear wall. I spoke to a nice lady and dropped change. The voice spoke, and I explained to him who and what and where he could send an official car to pick up the packages. We'd talk later, I said, after I visited Bel-Air.

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I showed the guard identification. Up ahead, at the end of smooth blacktop, the house sat like a floating island dessert, all white and dreamy on top of a hill. Manicured lawn, flowers I didn't know the names of, and trees I'd never seen. The higher the rich lived on a hill, the more bodies were buried underneath it.

A butler wheezed in. The starch in his collar must be what held him up all day; screams into his pillow what got him through the night. He led, and I followed him into the large office of Mr. William Howard. A large man in his morning suit, gray, his wingtip collars pointed forward like daggers, presided over a massive desk. Instead of framed accolades for his business acumen or philanthropy in this den of walnut and mahogany, mounted trophies lined the wall behind him.

Moose. Wolf. Deer. All those glass eyes stared down, softer and sadder than the hard, gray ones in front of me. In the corner of the desk sat a large bowl of pistachios.

"You're here about the Hernández boy."

"Miguel. Your daughter was seeing him."

"Let's be clear from the onset, you're not to speak to her without the family lawyer present."

I sat down, uninvited to do so. "Nice digs. Looks like you've done well for yourself." I crossed my leg, resting my snap-brim straw hat on my knee. I hadn't allowed the manservant to take my coat either. "Lawyering up makes a poor first impression, Mr. Howard."

"She's a minor and I'd stand at her side, but I'm a busy man. I want to contain the matter before it becomes a scandal."

"Because he's Mexican."

“No, because he was murdered, and I don’t like your tone. You come onto my property, with your dark suit and white hat, flash a tin star at my doorman, and don’t even so much as mumble your name. I’ll wager you’re a fraud and nothing more than a juice badge. I’ll bet you walked into City Hall and bought yourself a spot on the police force.”

“You’d guess wrong,” I said.

He snorted. “If memory serves me right, it costs fifty dollars to become a sergeant, and two-fifty to become a captain. I have a good mind to call Chief Horrall and see what he has to say about you.”

“Bronze, the shield is bronze.” I pointed to the phone. “Go on, call him. Knock yourself out because I don’t report to the chief. I’ll save you the trouble and tell you I don’t report to any of the commissioners either, or what’s left of them since most of them resigned on account of corruption, something I’m sure you’re acquainted with.”

“If not the chief of police, then whom?” he asked.

“Chiefs work for commissioners, and commissioners serve at the pleasure of the mayor, like I do.”

“Mayor Bowron then.”

“Him, and his man.”

Howard smiled a sick little smile and showed some teeth. His hand reached over to the dish and scooped up a handful of pistachios. He unpeeled them and threw a couple of the unshelled nuts into his trap. He squinted as he chewed. I watched his jawbone pulse and the Adam’s apple bob.

“I suggest you leave before I call security.”

“You mean the two goons you have on retainer. Main Street, is it? Next to the hotel.” His eyes bugged for a second. “You really like those things, don’t you?” I pointed to the dish of nuts. “Pistachios.”

“What’s it to you?” he said, chomping on more pistachios. His fingertips, red.

“The nut itself is green, but the shell is red.” I shrugged. “Makes no sense.”

“Pistachios are from Persia and harvesting them is a violent process that renders the shell mutilated. Flawed appearances lower retail value, so the shells are dyed red.”

I nodded. “I get it—like a crime and then a coverup.”

“Any other questions I can answer for you?”

“One,” I said as I rose from my seat. “Other than the fancy party, did Miguel Hernández ever visit this house? Talk to you in this very room?”

“That’s two questions. I think you should leave. There’s the door. Use it.”

I put on my hat and grabbed a handful of pistachios. I dropped some on his blotter and kept the rest inside my fist. “Good day, Mr. Howard.”

I traversed the expanse of carpeting, shaking my head. The wealthy and powerful are different. The door closed behind me. I was headed for the entrance when I heard the soft patter of feet down the stairs on my left. The young lady was smart as a cat burglar. She was holding her shoes by the straps. She didn’t want dear old dad to hear her. “I’m Cissy.”

“I know.”

“You don’t work for my father, do you?”

“I don’t.”

“You’re here about Miguel.”

“I am.”

“You know who murdered him.”

“Two suspects are in custody.”

“Then, the matter is settled,” she said, eyes glassy and her sigh indicating relief.

“Not quite,” I said.

Her eyes lifted. “I don’t understand.”

“There’s the matter of motivation and who put them up to it. Say, maybe you can help me with something.”

“Anything, please. I want to help.”

I glanced at the door behind me. “Miguel like pistachios?”

“Yes, why?”

I put my clenched hand out, she placed hers underneath it, not understanding but trusting me. “Miguel’s fingertips were stained red when he was found dead. His killers stripped him of his clothes to make it look like someone hated zoot suits.” As I was talking to her, I released the pistachios, one at a time, into the palm of her hand.