

LURID DETAILS

AN URBAN LEGEND FOR THE YOUNG AND NEW

This story could only take place in Los Angeles. It has to be somewhere high-crime and danger-loving where a door would plausibly be left unlocked. It requires an exceptionally pretty, pathologically ambitious, and wholly disposable girl. A city full of people who believe so fiercely that they are going to die rich that they take the sort of risks only a billionaire could survive. Equal parts high profile, under the radar, and off the map. Sex, drugs, and getting killed for being too nice. Sensationalism as the local religion. And the sun has to be shining while all of this is happening. Remember that. It's easier to believe that the girl would be so stupid if you picture the sunshine.

She called about the studio apartment for rent because it was only one block from her office and even though she hated this job, answering phones all day was relatively un-taxing so she thought she would keep it until she finished writing her screenplay in the evenings.

Her screenplay wasn't going very well. It was about a girl like her from the Midwest who moved to L.A. to work in movies. The heroine kept meeting a lot of outrageous characters: an elderly, tobacco-stained Mafioso who had spotted her at an all-night grocery store and constantly brought her foot-high tiramisu cakes curlicued with the names of unknown couples; a snarling girl

with blacklight violet hair who wore crawly plum velvet thrift store capes and described herself as a drummer but spent most of her time reading tarot cards for free, laying out the deck then chuckling darkly, refusing to voice her disastrous predictions; a guy who arranged twigs in his Amish beard and stood in front of a coffee shop, hat on the sidewalk, hoping to be appreciated as a performance artist and subsidized with loose change; an excitable little golf caddy who went out at night with a can of baby blue spray paint and large stencils, branding the freeway off-ramps with such cryptic messages as: YIELD TO THE DRASTIC VOID TEMPLE.

Despite all of these colorful characters—Life in L.A. was surreal! You couldn't make this stuff up if you tried!—nothing much was happening in her screenplay. If she could eliminate her commute, she would have an extra hour and a half per night to write.

The extra hour and a half would slip down from the craggy hills that ringed the city, in the shape of a scraggly, world-weary urban coyote. The coyote would leap through the window of her new apartment and sit at her feet, slurping cappuccino from a saucer, her witch's familiar. She would sit with concert pianist posture, raising her stiff, alert hands over her keyboard. The extra hour and a half would poke its wet grey snout against her ear, telling her what should happen next.

The girl had a very good imagination, but the things she imagined didn't really belong in a screenplay. Screenplays have to be both fake and stubbornly realistic at the same time. She was new at it. It was all foreign to her.

The realtor didn't bother to hide her disdain for a person who could only afford a studio. "Yeah," the realtor snapped into the phone, "It's open. Let yourself in and look around."

"Thank you," said the girl. She had been brought up to think that good manners would open many doors.

"Yeah," sighed the realtor, then coughed cigarette phlegm into the girl's ear, then hung up.

The girl called her boyfriend before she went to look at the studio.

"It's not a good idea," he said. "Wait for the weekend and I'll come with you."

"Someone'll get it by then."

"No one wants a studio. How much they asking?"

"1050."

"I'll talk them down to nine. We'll look on Sunday. I've got to work late with Marilyn again."

“That’s fine. I’ll be writing.”

“Love you.”

“Me too. Bye.”

She was still going to look at the studio at lunch time. She thought she should tell someone at the office where she was going, just in case. She wasn’t really friendly with anyone at work. It was a top entertainment law office. Very well known people called and screamed at their lawyer, who then called and screamed at six other people. It was not clear if this ever accomplished anything. The very well known people did not seem to understand that the stacks of papers they had signed had the final word, even if the papers were dull and soberly formatted and never screamed.

The more the girl saw of Hollywood people, the more she thought of them as bats, travelling in swarms, laying siege, always flapping and screaming, never wandering far from the pack because on their own they would be reduced to a peculiar little rodent, no real threat at all. The screaming was essential. They screamed and screamed, pushing it, testing how far their sound waves could travel before they hit something bigger and the screaming bounced back at them. It was how they gauged their position in the world. She was sure that they all slept badly, suspended upside down, never at ease, miniature dragon wings pulled over their faces like leathery baby blankets, twitching through the non-working hours with the paranoia of reviled creatures until it was time to scream again.

All of the Assistants were much older than the girl, and got paid a lot more. She had recently discovered that the office’s monthly expenditure on fresh flowers exceeded her salary. The flowers could never quite mask the pervasive funk of stress and antacids. The scents clashed disastrously. All those towering bouquets ended up smelling chemical, like floral-scented disinfectant, and they looked like bleeding ulcers. Guests always left with a headache.

The Assistants talked non-stop about shopping and kids, two subjects the girl was not interested in. After the weekend, there would be breathless accounts of items purchased and things said and done by their kids. Even the lawyers participated in these Monday morning exchanges, though they downplayed the shopping so their underlings wouldn’t get jealous of them, and inflated the amount of time they had spent with kids, so they wouldn’t get jealous of their underlings. When someone asked the girl about her weekend, she would say, “I was writing.” They would nod and think, *Stupid girl*. They had all abandoned their screenplays years ago.

Lorraine probably would have been interested in the fact that the girl was going to look at a vacant property that had been left open for anyone to just

walk inside. Lorraine's desk was nearest to the reception area, where the girl sat brooding over day-old trades, trying to memorize faces so that visiting clients would be spared the slight of having to announce their names. Lorraine had frosted hair and nails and the arrestingly symmetrical facial features of a leading lady, only she was 50 pounds too heavy. She called it her pregnancy weight, even though her only child had now started college. If the girl had told Lorraine where she was going, Lorraine would certainly have put a stop to it. She would have told the girl that empty properties were hideouts for rapists, that L.A. was not a place to take chances like that, that girls like her disappeared every day of the week. Lorraine had moved to L.A. from Minnesota when she was 18, came all the way by herself on a Greyhound bus, not knowing a soul, her stomach bulging with what turned out to be a hysterical pregnancy, and she could tell you plenty of stories like this one that would make your blood curdle. Afterwards, she told this story over and over, especially to her son's girlfriends. She didn't want her son getting mixed up with any careless women.

But Lorraine was in the bathroom when the girl left, slathering more pink frosted lipstick onto her still-gorgeous head, glowering at her flabby body. As Lorraine looked in the mirror and contemplated becoming a Satanist if they could rid her of the weight, the girl took the elevator down twenty-three floors and walked out onto the bright, magnolia-scented streets of Santa Monica.

She walked briskly along toward the studio for rent. Even the quieter, residential side streets in L.A. seemed excited, on the brink of something. The green grass bristled. Lawn sprinklers chattered like monkeys and doused her ankles, stinging a little. She had to mentally pause and ask herself what time of year it was. Summer year round! She decided it was fall.

She felt guilty about going against her boyfriend's advice. She hadn't actually lied, but she had been misleading, leaving him to think that she would wait for him before looking at the apartment. Where she came from, lies were always found out and liars were always punished.

If she moved into this studio, she would live about an hour's drive from her boyfriend. She imagined writing to her mother: *We only live in two different neighborhoods in Los Angeles, but if this were home, he would live as far away as two towns over!* She was beginning to understand that although her mother didn't like her living in Los Angeles, she was there largely so she could report interesting things to her mother, unbelievable things, magical things. Her mother had told her lots of stories as she was growing up, and it gave her a taste for the extraordinary. Her mother's life hadn't turned out as planned. Her father barely acknowledged her mother anymore and with the kids grown and

gone, her mother had frayed into loose ends. The girl felt an obligation to feed her mother interesting reports, as vital as a nutrition drip down an I.V. tube. Of course, many of the goings-ons here alarmed her mother, but the girl was unsparing in her reports. She thought of it as an EKG machine shocking her mother back to life, forcing her heartbeat to go on a little longer.

The girl's boyfriend was untroubled by family ties. He was a mover and a shaker. He had grown up poor, despised everyone he had known before moving to L.A., and was determined to succeed. He kept moving up, up, up. He had started out as a runner, a faceless grunt in a motorcycle helmet delivering scripts and contracts and baskets of soy-based pastries around town, and already he had moved up to Assistant to one of the V.P.'s at a production company.

The girl's financial and career prospects kept getting worse. Each job she took was more ill-paid than the last, and her responsibilities kept diminishing. She told herself she just wanted a mindless day job so she could work on her screenplay, but she knew this panicked her boyfriend. She kept meeting people who could do nothing for her career. She tended to befriend unattractive people prone to frizz and acne who rapidly told her outrageous life stories, rife with abuse and fleeings and psychotropic misfortunes, then asked to borrow her car. This enraged her boyfriend. "Who comes to L.A. without a car?! It's like these people want to fail!" He didn't say, "It's like *you* want to fail," but this was implied. He didn't understand that she was gathering stories, that her life had been very sheltered and unerringly stable, that this placid, clear-horized existence was what was killing her mother, the same as living too near a radiation factory. Exposure to eccentric dysfunction was a kind of life-saving nectar to her. These self-deluded losers were giving her something very precious, something he—with his circled sports car ads and savings for a pair of the right exorbitantly priced shoes and plans to eventually walk her down the aisle with an announcement blurb in *The Hollywood Reporter* listing them both by job title and company—could never provide for her.

She was sure her boyfriend loved her. Her certainty was based mainly on the fact that he told her so repeatedly. And she loved him, or she wouldn't have said so.

She shouldn't have worried so much that her boyfriend was going to bring fatal predictability into her future. He was already trying to leave her. He had identified the most powerful female in his company and was fucking her using an illegal, half-herbal, three times as powerful version of Viagra sold by the insomniac interns at UCLA med school. The girl's boyfriend swallowed the little moss-colored pills and gave the V.P. of Business Affairs the impression