

We Mask His Hideous Voice with More Volume

By David Lawler

In 1982, we took our cocaine in tin foil pouches with Pete, the bartender at the cafe on the Boulevard near Vine. Big, dark streets with the lamps spaced out so we'd have patches of shadow where we could do our business. Occasionally, a squad car would slowly pass by, but they were looking for darker types - Mexican or black or Korean roughs. Me, I came out from Bristol, knew nothing of Los Angeles. Pete was our contact. We'd be drinking and lay out an extra \$200 on the table, big tip. He'd pick it up and take our order, go to the pay phone and put in the order. He never called anybody he didn't know.

He'd go direct with a swarthy man name of Andy, from Peru. Don't let this get you down on Peru. They're also known for coffee and chocolate. Imagine that! An entire country in South America known for the three C's, the best three C's. That country had to be high and frozen off its arse, loading up on caffeine in the morning and afternoon, a little chocolate at lunchtime, and topping it off with white flakes!

Everybody was stoned in California (even the children), mostly lower California, mostly near the water, so they could make a clean break of it and start paddling for Maui if the heat was coming around the corner. Cops weren't so good at stake-outs or undercover work - that was a New York thing. Cops in New York looked like thugs, so they got around it easy, but California? These were suburban family men - too clean, smelled too clean, and shaved, aftershave, manicured fingernails, and when they tried to go undercover, they didn't do a very good job at being realistic. They were over the top, covered in dirt and tattered clothes, smelling of motor oil and gasoline. They didn't have the lived-in body odor smell. Suburban family men took their share. The evidence lockers never stayed full too long. Two years after a bust, the flake and the pipes and the grass would start to disappear.

State and city employers weren't big on the overtime, so they made their own money just in time for Christmas.

I had a little glass of bourbon at the end of the marble bar. I was playing with those swizzle sticks, making shapes since they were bendy. Pete was making his call and we were about ready to close up. It was three in the morning and it was hot. I loved those lights over the canyon. We got out and Pete locked

up and I took a look at the lights. We piled into Pete's El Dorado, big-ass Caddy, cushy seats and cold air, a couple of American beers in bottles for the road.

Me, Pete driving, my mate Pierre (not from France, he was from Boise) and our resident alien (not counting me), Wilson. He was from Sacramento if anybody asked, but I think was he was Ecuadorian. His English was perfect and he had flat, black hair and muddy skin.

We went up Vine, looked at the hookers on the corners. We never got hookers. Their pimps were treacherous, always shifty, putting the product a few feet away and then coming up to you if you dared talk to them. Again – over the top; hookers wearing next to nothing and their employers with their hats. Besides, I had a girl. She was good.

She was faithful - a commodity for this time. She never hooked up with strangers. She always stayed with me when she saw me. I had a house on the beach, Marina-del-Rey, beautiful. I called her Marina, but her real name was Sally.

Pete kept the Caddy at thirty, a little over the hooker-cruising speed, and we went up five blocks and turned it at the big stop light and the pay phone. Pete's connection was waiting in the foyer of an apartment building with ruddy-brown tiles, real tiles. He got out of the car, wallet in hand to make the score. That's when the cops came - blended out of the wood and brickwork, guns drawn, stupid blue hats with tips. They were dressed like cops - no undercover bullshit - demonic voices bouncing off. They went in for the kill.

"Up against the wall, motherfucker!"

Bouncing silence. I was disgraced for twenty seconds. I slipped out of the car, nobody there to cover me with a gun, so I booked it, ran like shit-soup down the back of a thigh. I was across the street as they hooked Pete in cuffs - he didn't get the sale, so he'd spend a night in jail, person of interest in an ongoing investigation, and then they'd let him go. My buddy Pierre came with, stayed under shadows and watched. We faked like we were the Crazy Street People.

We cringed when we saw the cops beating down on Pete fierce. They broke his nose, gave him a black eye, and I had to restrain Pierre because he was getting angry at all this. No reason, I suspected. This was par for it - cops were angry, ugly bastards and they got off on pain. If not their own, then somebody else's. They grabbed Wilson trying to make a run for it. Never run at a drug bust - you're a suspect waiting to happen. I found myself pierced by Pierre's tears. Its okay, Pierre. He'll be okay. We'll spring him tomorrow morning.

"Let's get out of here," I told him, taking him by his arm. I needed cash for the unavoidably long ride back to my Marina. I was busted, having lost a bundle on the Dodgers. I bit it bad and the banks were closed. They'd impound Pete's vehicle, so we we'd have to find a cab back on the Boulevard. We piled in and got to my house on the beach in pretty good time. No traffic on the freeway. It was a perfect night for riding in a cab.

I thought of my Marina with her big, harsh eyes. She had a kid she kept with us - Josh, playful and so young at eight, hard to treat, hard to live with and adjust to. He liked me more than her for some reason, blood relations and strangers in great company. All I was - crazy family living and loving.

This is who we were at the time. He liked the Dodgers and so did I. I felt like a Dad without the attachment. I was more like a good old-man friend, and I relished the opportunity to one day take him to Vine and have him properly laid.

I snuck in - bad form. Through the side door. I stuck Pierre in the guest room, the low room I called it because the while thing was either on stilts or on the side of a hill. The guest room was level and the rest was higher. Had a private entrance, so we agreed he'd sleep it off while I made peace with Marina and Josh. They were asleep, so I slinked into the bed I shared with Marina. She was up when she heard the creak in the floor an inch from the door.

"Are you okay," she asked me in her modified Anglo-fake America voice.

"Yeah, I didn't wanna wake you." I took off my pants and slid in. Her skin was warm. Loved it. "Go back to sleep," I told her and I cradled her hips. I liked sleeping near her ass. There was a curve in the bottom of her belly and the jutting height of her hip and I nestled in the crevice.

"Okay," she yawned, and we slept like family.

I wrote a song for Merle Haggard five years before and I made some money - just enough from an album sale, but I thought it was a good song, should've been a single, gone straight to the top on C&W, should've - didn't. Wasn't released as a single, but it should've been. It might've been pop enough for the Hot 100, but I got checks every quarter, every four months and new money would roll in and allow me to keep the house. I tried to keep the drugs at bay - only spend when I had it, but I'd get discouraged. Marina had to take a job to pay the bills. She was my angel and I think she loved me at the time.

She made me the part-time daddy for Joshua, the warrior, interesting bad-ass of the Bible. For a time, I thought of going to Africa and capturing some sounds. I wanted to get those drums on tape, but a

couple people beat me to it - not fair to have those great ideas a few months before bigger names got to them. Great minds think so fucking alike! I wanted to feel it.

Pierre got up before everybody else. He came to the kitchen to look for sausages and black pudding. We didn't have black pudding. He developed a taste for it in Scotland in 1975. It was disgusting, but Marina had a recipe.

She made my mate breakfast and Joshua had some before I was out of the shower, attempting to figure how I was gonna explain his presence to them, but he had a cover story, and he was ready for action.

"So you guys are collaborating," Marina said as I entered, drying my washed hair.

"Yeah, we're working," I said, not knowing what the Hell this was all about.

"Is it a song," Joshua asked. His face full of pudding.

"No," I said, lifted up, "It was actually that African project I told you about, remember? I wanted to get the sounds, the drums, and since Pierre had already been to Kenya and the outlying districts, we agreed to collaborate."

"You've been to Kenya," Joshua asked. He was curious.

"Twice," Pierre told him. That could be true.

"What was it like?"

"It was...beautiful," Pierre said. He had a gift for poetry, and it was his turn since I was scrambling for the grapefruit juice. Marina was by the refrigerator door and I had an impulse to touch and grab her ass. I wanted to be asleep on her. I wanted to move my hands up her naked back and close my eyes and feel. "The grass was greener there than anywhere else and there were animals like parked cars and traffic. You just had to wade through the passing snakes and the big turtles, very big turtles. You could hop on them for a ride to the next division." Joshua's eyes were like saucers listening. "You know what I liked most of Kenya?" Joshua shook his head. "It was the truth, the honesty. It wasn't a surface...like here, but more real. More smell. More sensation. You should go sometime." Joshua was more curious than ever.

In the bedroom, I got dressed for the day's activities. We had to get Peter sprung from county lock-up, perhaps take him to a hospital for treatment of his injuries, and get our materials for the next night. It was an ongoing race to be popular, special people, the big people, whoever we were. We were strangers in Los Angeles. I preferred the Marina and my Marina to that horrible place. I heard the alarm clock and shut it off as my Marina came in, looking at me like the little boy I was. We never grow up, do we? We are

children from the time we are born to the time we die. We live in illusion and love and feel in illusion. Hell of time to figure it out at 37.

I wanted her so bad it hurt, but we had company. I felt better in the mornings. I felt clean and free like I would not have to tour the bars or score with Pete. I told Pierre to get a shower and a shave and clean up in my worn clothes.

"So, who is he," she asked.

"He's my mate."

"Where are you going?"

"We have to break Peter out of the joint," I said, and she understood quickly. I suddenly had an urge to compose another country song. I felt steel guitars in my blood for a second.

I want to love you like no other man could. I want to hold you like no other man could.

I'll love you like I should, but I can't love you 'cuz I got troubles, yes I got troubles.

We could be together for a moment, for a moment's sake, but I got so many troubles.

If you want me, you'll be asking for trouble 'cuz that's all I got, I got so many troubles.

If only I had a pen and paper, because I had the melody and the melody was so easy, we were talking about a song that would write itself and become a pop-crossover-bastard hit on the charts. Be enough to finance the next ten or so years and Marina could quit her bullshit job and we could put Josh in a good school.

Maybe I could have a baby with Marina if my gear was still in check. I thought it was. We had a few misfires. I believed in it. I believed in her, and she, for some reason, wanted a newborn with me, wanted to see a child's face with my features, if they could be present.

"Are you going to stay out of trouble," she asked me and I had to look at her damned brown eyes.

"Of course - you know me, I'm made of Teflon," and I got to make a precious squeeze of her waist. That was all she needed to know. She did know me. We can't help who we are; sometimes we surrender and we forget, but we are who we are, and we can't always change. Sometimes somebody will be there for you and change parts of your character to fit their conception and we wind up grateful. We wind up wiser. It doesn't always work that way. Most of the time, we're angry at being disturbed.

So, there I was in the parked car, my tiny Civic prowling cheap on gutter streets, dirty LA, can't escape

here but feeling the moment for a minute, a big minute, and waiting. Pierre got Peter by the arm, led him out and brought him to the backseat of the car. He got in. He looked bad, terrible in fact.

The broken nose, several lumps on his head, blood dried on his mouth. He was bad. I popped some aspirin and offered him a couple. He was coughing bad. It was an aggravated beating and he clutched shattered rib spaces in his hollow chest. I thought he was tough and I was wrong.

Wilson came out moments later, but he shuffled off left, wanted nothing to do with us. He didn't look as badly beat as Peter. He was about to sob when I turned the Civic and made for the nearest hospital.

I looked at the sunshine, gleaming upon beads of my sweat, hot in Hell here, California misery - special and precious. I lost gaps of time. I remembered hiding the previous night. I remembered Marina's swell, her hip against my chin. I remembered Kenya, Pierre's Kenya, and riding on turtles for transport. For some reason, I thought of following Marina to the ends of earth and giving praise and worship. I hoped she would want to go to Kenya and watch me record and perform with half-naked men and we could dance with them.

I sat leaning against the hot hood when Pierre came out clutching Peter with a bag of prescription pills. Peter was still coughing.

I plugged in Merle Haggard on the old eight-track and we listened along the coast road. This was the best - the sounds piping through. I kept the stereo in good condition and I like eight-track; great stereo system coming in, tuned to my ears and nobody else's. I liked to hear the rhythm section, gorgeous, and I reasoned only eight-track could give me that bass. It was the closest the average consumer could get to master tapes from the studios. People didn't know all our stuff was recorded on tape, mastered and then put out on all the media. It was better than the small cassettes and better than spinning vinyl. The compact discs were coming and I heard some demos at Sterling Sound, Santa Monica - didn't like 'em. Cute and shiny, but not enough symbiosis for my tastes.

I knew Peter might have a rough night of it, but he was going to have an ode to joy with those miracle pills the doctor gave him. He needed company, so Pierre and I agreed to keep him company. I took him back to his flat above the bar. Look at the clouds, I had told Peter. Look them move, I said. He did it. He looked at the clouds and saw faces and animals.

Peter saw his father, a big and burly creature with a handlebar mustache like the baseball pitcher Rollie Fingers, made him smile. We were alive for a moment, troubling little children causing pain and

progress. This is who we were.

It was night in Peter's nice apartment. He had a one-bedroom, but it was chock-loaded with beautiful art. Masks. He liked masks. All kinds. All faces. The faces had voices in them. My voices were stodgy, old Brit-voices, crumbling at all sides. Pete was in his bed and I was blending him a concoction of banana, strawberry, walnut pieces, milk, and cinnamon.

There ain't no other I could feel but your skin so linked to mine,
and there you are making me want you more and more,
I live inside you and you inside of me, it feels so fine,
do you think we could be together forever like grapes on a vine?

I was working my song and bringing Peter his punch. I saw Pierre by his bedside, holding his hand and praying the Lord's Prayer. Peter thought he was going to die from pain. I came in and gave him another pill, opened a door and heard violins being plucked not from a bow, but from fingers - little beings with long fingers plucking a violin like it was a guitar. Remember the violins, old man - they'll come in handy when you need them. I brought Peter my brew and he drank like a thirsty man in the desert - Kenya nearby, riding turtles. It was probably time to leave. I turned to head for the door when Pierre put his hand on my shoulder.

"What about Peter," he asked.

"He'll be fine. I promise."

"What do I do," Pierre asked, somewhat panicked.

"Keep giving him the pills. Close the bar for a day. Make him sleep, even if he doesn't want to sleep."

"Where are you going," he asked.

"Home," I said, thinking of smiles and Country music and Kenya, and grapes on a vine, and little boy sweet. "He'll be fine," I repeated. It was time to run home, or peddle off as the Civic would, coasting at thirty on the Boulevard would get me as close as I could get to him.

I started out the door, then saw Wilson - he'd come back, and he was angry. He had a gun in his hand. Oh shit, I thought - no way I was gonna have to take a couple bullets.

Wilson fired and I shut the door as fast as I could. The slugs hit near the peephole, would've gone

into my brain. I would have been dead. Pierre heard the shots, came racing out with the empty glass of concoction.

"What...," he started.

"Wilson," I growled.

"Are we trapped," Pierre asked.

"For the moment. Does Peter have any guns?"

"I don't know," Pierre said.

"Ask him."

"He's asleep," Pierre quickly said. Shit, again! Somebody would hear shots and call the cops and we'd have to deal with that whole mess, more of this California bullshit. "What should we do?" How fast would the cops show up if somebody reported nearby dispatches of a gun? This was a better section of Los Angeles, so it could be record time, or never.

"Wilson," I screamed through the door. He didn't look crazy or strung-out. He looked angry. Didn't like the arrest scene, liked more getting his money back and trying again, or maybe getting what he had coming: a quarter of the contents of the sale.

It was just as much his money and his cocaine as it was mine, Pierre's, and Peter's. Hell, we didn't get our money back either. Why was he firing the gun at us? He should've taken out his rage on the cops. "You better cut that shit out, or every cop in the neighborhood will be up here in five seconds. We still have time to explain it away, say it was a car backfiring, say somebody was firing a gun on the block!"

"I want my money," Wilson grunted back and kicked the door. He kicked the door again and again. We couldn't call the cops. They had to come to us. It had to be an incident. Where was I gonna get \$200?

"I'll let you in, but you gotta put the gun away before you get shot," I told Wilson, and I was serious. Pierre took my arm and shook his head from fright. I told him it would be all right. I wanted to go home. I opened the door and there he was: Wilson, no gun in sight, no suspicion, and no sweaty brow. He looked fine. He had his hands behind his back. I moved out of the way and he came in, sat down in a chair facing the couch. I turned to Pierre.

"Will you get us some drinks?"

Pierre nodded, about to crap himself, but he moved swiftly to the kitchen and started pouring from Peter's private stash. Good wines, reds and whites, bubbly solid or stodgy or fruity or smoky, like tasting ashes. He gave us glasses. I sat down opposite Wilson. We studied each other. This could turn into a

quiet cocktail party situation. Then, there were the sirens coming close. Somebody heard the shots and called it in.

"You know you got busted? We didn't have anything to do with it," I said as I sipped.

"How do I know this isn't a scam," Wilson asked in his good English.

"You have my word, and I don't lie."

"What about your friends," Wilson asked. I couldn't answer. I only sipped. Pierre was shaking badly, probably making Wilson nervous with the gun secreted on his person, possibly stuffed down the back of his pants. I saw a shadow move in the other room, and I was sure it was Peter.

"I ever tell you about my buddy Merle," I asked Wilson. "Ogee from Muscogee?" He shook his head. "He came out here to cut a record with a couple of the luminaries. He liked my sample tunes and asked me to write something special for him. So I drove across the border, drank margaritas and wrote lyric on a couple of cocktail napkins, brought it back the next day. He liked it, so we did a one-off, one take. The producer didn't like his voice, said nobody would pay to hear it. He wanted to put in a wall-of-sound type thing, so he could drown out Merle's voice. They were starting to streamline vocals at that time. He didn't know his stuff because in Nashville, Merle was a god. We did the take and he put it on his record. I don't know if it was his biggest seller, but it was close."

Tremors, hot and ugly, the walls start shaking, incredible rumble from the ground up. The apartment was teetering on the edge of a precipice. Wilson's fingers dug into the upholstery, and the remainder of wine in my glass was bubbling. Pierre got on the floor, hands and knees; he tried to keep his balance, but his terror was mounting. This was a full-on earthquake; shaking collapsing floors. The masks on Peter's wall were vibrating, clinking like glasses, and then the glass broke. The masks fell and shattered.

"Get to the doorway," I shouted over the fray. Wilson waited for me and Pierre to get there first. We hung under the fixture - assuming it was load-bearing; we might actually get out of this with stories to tell. The sirens stopped for the moment. The first-responders were probably caught off-guard and thus stopped by the volcanic burst of asphalt all over the street and pavement. California bullshit - earthquakes, tremors, aftershocks were a part of our lives since we came here. Most of us were strangers to this land, so we would think it was Wrath of God time, sinners all congregated to the western soil being made aware of just what the elements could do to us. I admit I was absolutely terrified, and I wondered if Marina and Joshua would feel the effects. I wondered if they were terrified. A symphony of broken glass pricked up my lobes, my canals.

To know it lasted eleven seconds (according to the newspapers the next day) made me feel like such a little boy. My eyes were wide. Wilson began to panic in the eternity of flying books, the shards. I shielded my eyes, remembering a trip to the hospital when I was seven; glass in my eyes. At that moment, Peter chose to make an appearance.

He burst forth, wearing his tattered bathrobe, sweat pouring down. His bruises busting open, gun in his hand. He made a charge for Wilson, fired a shot which pierced into Wilson's arm, stunning him before he could get to his own gun. Peter was raging, and to think I assumed the prescription pain killers would calm him; relax his blood. Wilson fell. I had my hands over my ears, kept my eyes closed. Peter appeared hovering over Wilson and fired again, hitting Wilson twice in his chest and once in his gut. The blood splattered, painted the walls, got on his crushed masks. In eleven seconds, the problem of Wilson was over (or postponed, at least) and the problem of Peter had begun. I had thought of early retirement, of Marina-del-Rey and my Marina and my Joshua; my foster son who almost had my eyes but not quite. Peter's eyes were made of fire - the fire god, the demon, the Devil - he was rage and Death. Let him carry on, I thought, until he decided it was over. The man with the gun always gets to decide when the festivities are over.

The seconds ticked by. The eleven seconds were history. According to the newspapers, it was a six - a six for eleven seconds, providing generous destruction over a 20-mile radius, thunder cracks and fault lines, steam building up and plates shifting under our feet. We were survivors, strangely enough. Dozens had died, and hundreds were injured.

It was clear silence. Hydrants exploded and filled the air with water. There were more sirens than ever before - bits and pieces of plate glass fell from the sky.

It was danger. Peter looked at what he had done. Wilson was dead. Blood poured up from his chest, his heart a blood pump, funneling fresh into the hot, hazy air, pooling all around us. I took my hands away from my ears; saw Pierre first with a big pillow over his head. I saw Peter holding the gun, looking toward me. He let go of the gun and it crashed into the ground with a loud thud.

"Are you okay," he asked, groggy.

"Yes," I said, nodding my head.

Peter yawned and rubbed throbbing temples. He turned and headed back into his bedroom. Did he think it was a dream? Did he think he had a dream where he killed an intruder during an earthquake? I didn't notice, but I had a gash in my arm, my left arm near the muscle. My writing hand. Pierre got up and

took me by the injured arm and off we went.

Aftershocks (bad ones) reigned the rest of the day going into night and the next day, and on they went for the rest of the week. Cops were in and out and we had to get our stories straight. We called Wilson an "intruder" - the kind with the gun like the looters who terrorize before, during, and after natural tragedy. To call him an intruder made me ill. He was one of us, except he was angry about losing his \$200.

I spent a day in a hospital, sitting in bed and composing my Earthquake Lullaby, not a Country song, not a Southern California hick song, just violins being plucked. I wanted to hear violins plucked with fingers, not with bows, and I wanted a sweet English voice, female to rhyme with me, maybe I would record too. I would join her in the song, in the back of the vocal, singing a false baritone. I had some singing experience. I wanted the words I wrote - lonely country boy lyric, plucking violin, and the drums of Kenya, those unimaginable drums. I made a song up in my head in a room (I got my own room!) in a hospital. Great story to tell somebody sometime; in a bar with the lights down low, hour before closing time with an old black man kicking a jukebox because it ate his quarter when he wanted to hear John Lee.

Marina and Joshua came down with McDonalds in a bag for me, but I couldn't taste anything yet. They'd put me on relaxers and pain medication. My taste buds could only register burning cardboard, but they sat and ate with me. A day later, they took me home to my beach, my arm in a sling and a bag of meds for the duration. That was how I kicked my old habits, thinking I could be fresh in the morning, and muddle through and make my own decisions. Your friends, your family ... they can try to help you, but in the end, you simply must do it yourself.

It took two years and a great deal of patience. It took earthquakes and crumbling masks and thoughts of riding turtles. I was, and still am, a child. It is true that we are children from the time we are born to the time we die.

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