

1.

AT LAST my VW Bug rounded the summit of Sepulveda Pass on the 405 and started down the other side.

Taking the Sunset Boulevard exit, I worked back uphill past mansions receding into darkness, downshifting from third gear to second, once, struggling, even into first (*Legs don't fail me now*, said my bumper sticker). Lights spraying out below mapped the whole Los Angeles basin, that sea-lapped cauldron where Destiny was going to make me a movie star. On Beverly Crest I found the closed gates to 3022 Tower Grove Drive and pulled up beside them. I just wanted to take a look.

Stopping the motor, I could hear the merest of whooshes from the freeway. Over the wall and up the slope I could see the house's long roofline, arched windows giving onto ceiling beams washed by a homey, golden glow.

I felt too tired to go find a motel, and thoroughly at home. So much so that when a smart rap came on the window and a flashlight shone in my face I startled

awake.

“Sir, can I help you? *Sir?*”

Behind the glare I caught gleams of a silver badge. Alongside mine stood a police car.

“It’s all right, Officer: This was my grandfather’s house.”

“Who’s your grandfather?”

“Kid Crusoe.”

“*Who?*”

After inspecting my New York driver’s license, he told me to move along. I guess I was lucky; 1972 was just three years after the Manson murders. He followed me back to Sunset, where I turned towards Hollywood. Coming across a strip of motels, I pulled into one and got a room.

MY MOTHER HAD given me the telephone number of Victor Strange, the old silent-film comedian, my grandfather’s best friend. She said to call him, meet him, see what doors he could open for me. I’d scoffed, knowing there’s no avoiding making the rounds, seeing casting agents and going to auditions.

So what did I do my first day in L.A.? Visited the Griffith Observatory. Behind it I found a path to the top of Mt. Hollywood. There I took in another view of the basin as the morning overcast finally lifted to reveal a sky of baby-shit green. The stark white planks of the Hollywood sign poked up, leaning, in need of paint and repair, from the neighboring slopes of Mt. Lee.

Back at the motel, I sat down at the telephone and made myself dial Victor Strange’s number.

According to Mom, he was a sweet old guy, witty and dapper. Some of his comedies—*The Drugstore Boy*, *The Debt Collector*—were classics. Like my grandfather's, his career suffered after talkies came in, but instead of drinking himself to death he announced his retirement from pictures.

Mom said he'd held onto his money, too. She thought it was mostly in Los Angeles real estate—she wasn't sure—but from their occasional contacts it seemed there was money there still. At their last visit he'd taken my parents to dinner at Chasen's in his Cadillac.

Her own acting career never taking off beyond favors granted by her dad's old friends, Mom left California after the War. She was sorry to have nothing more to offer me, but was sure Uncle Vic—that's what she called him—could help fix me up in the industry. Though she also declared I didn't need any help.

So I dialed, cleared my throat—ready to sweep all before me, as I was accustomed to doing—and after seven long rings the phone was picked up.

"Hello?" said a distant, wary, but also rather young voice.

"Hello!" I said. "My name is Kid Crusoe Wyatt. My mother, Tabitha Crusoe Wyatt, suggested I call—"

Quietly the receiver was replaced and a buzzing commenced.

"Hello? Hello?"

All right, I thought. Whoever answered the phone wasn't Victor Strange. So who was it? His nurse? His keeper?

Next day I went looking for an apartment, and had the luck—seeing a huge *Apartments for Rent* banner

flapping over the Hollywood Freeway—to find Villa Tempesta squeezed up against the 101 off Franklin Avenue. Three stucco stories surrounded a swimming pool.

I took what they called a bachelor's, a furnished room with bath, fridge and double hotplate. *Perfect*. From my top-floor windows I could see flesh on display beside the pool from morning till night. During the day fumes built up in the corridor overlooking the freeway.

Since my own telephone wasn't connected yet, I used the lobby pay phone to try Victor Strange again.

I cleared my throat. Six rings this time.

"Hello?" The same voice.

"Hello, is Mr. Strange there? My name's Kid Crusoe Wyatt, and my mom's an old friend of his—"

"He's taking a nap."

The line buzzed. But progress, no?

Had to get out of there.

I knew where I was going. Drove down Santa Monica Boulevard, turned into Hollywood Memorial Cemetery, parked and went looking for Kid Crusoe's grave. Had the directions from Mom.

Turned out to be quite a journey, though, under a merciless August sun. The landscape—which could have been better kept up—featured elaborate tombs whose effigies looked surprised to be caught out by Death. And I got lost. Knew the general way, even the exact lot number, but still I wandered, though comforted by coming across my granddad's old pals' names carved in stone, including Douglas Fairbanks and Rudolph Valentino.

Unexpectedly, then, I stumbled upon semicircular

marble benches flanking a large slab in the grass,
raised bronze letters reading

KID CRUSOE
1897 – 1936

Kneeling, I put both hands to the stone. Here he was, *The Great Lover*, struck down in his prime: my grandfather. Sat on a bench. No one about. Finally the sun combined with my bladder to hurry me back to the Beetle and Villa Tempesta.

Near dinnertime I went downstairs to try Victor Strange one more time. Mom always said never to call anybody near dinnertime.

Two rings only.

“Hello?” An elderly, breathy voice.

“Mr. Strange? My name’s Kid Crusoe Wyatt, my mother’s Tabitha –”

“*Kid Crusoe?* You don’t say!”

“*Wyatt.* Mom suggested –”

“Have you eaten? How soon can you get over here?”

“Right now, I guess.”

“Have the address? 3022 Tower Grove Drive?”

“3022 Tower Grove Drive?” I repeated, surprised.
“Be right there.”

2.

WITH THE POWER of 40 horses the Bug zipped me over to Beverly Crest, turned through the gates on Tower Grove Drive and pulled up at the circle beside the grand front. The mansion was one of those sophisticated L.A. amalgams, in this case of Spanish Mission and Tudor, ending up looking rather Prairie Style—capacious, solid, well-proportioned, welcoming despite its grandeur.

I strolled to the front doors and was reaching for the bell when a voice snarled, “Over here.”

Looking, I saw someone at another set of doors at the far end of the house. Walking towards him gave me time to size him up, and to realize what it must have been like for people to look at *me*: This was a generously put together young man, tall, *handsome*, long copper hair curtaining his face, holding himself as though his body were a cornucopia filled with good things threatening to spill out. *Sexy*.

And bored-looking, like me when pretending not to notice admirers.

“He’s in here,” he said.

“Hello,” I said, putting my hand into his big warm one. “Kid Wyatt.”

“Alex.”

Through a mud room we entered a big, old-fashioned kitchen with a hooded range, blue linoleum and glass-fronted cabinets painted cream—a kitchen fit for preparing banquets, if hermetically sealed against the evening unfolding outdoors.

An old man—Victor Strange—sat at a table covered with yellow oilcloth, coffee in front of him.

“Kid Crusoe!” he exclaimed.

“Kid Crusoe *Wyatt*,” I corrected, again.

“You’re a dead ringer. Alex, another plate, please. Forgive us, we went ahead.”

At the range Alex loaded a plate with pork chops, green beans, mashed potatoes and gravy, and brought it over.

“Find us OK?” Victor Strange asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Wasn’t this my grandfather’s house?”

“You bet: The Kid and I lived here 15 years. Built it after *The Tragedy of Errors*, our movie together. I’ll show you the gold faucets later.”

This old man was old indeed, late 70s or thereabouts, frail, balding, with the big ears, gnarled nose and pouched eyes of the elderly. I would never have recognized him, though I’d seen some of his movies. Onscreen he was lithe and athletic through 20 silent pictures.

“I didn’t know you lived here,” I said.

“Never wanted to live anyplace else,” he answered. “I love this house. We both did. Bought his half off his

estate. And they tell me by now it might be worth almost half a million dollars. Imagine that!”

Alex fetched him more coffee and me a slice of pound cake. His Lacoste shirt showed off tanned arms corded with muscle.

“Mom says to give you her love, Mr. Strange.”

“How is your mom? Beautiful girl! Apple of the Kid’s eye!”

“Oh, she’s fine.”

“Her mother still alive?” Louella O’Toole, Kid Crusoe’s wife in the early 1920s, a silent star in her own right.

“No,” I said, “she died a few years ago.”

“Ach!”

“He’s getting tired,” Alex put in.

“You look just like the Kid, you know. Spitting image.”

“Thanks.”

“Except for that long hair. You two, like little girls playing peek-a-boo with that long hair. But you walk into a room and take over, just like he did.”

Alex gave him a sharp look.

“Oh, you, too, Alex. You have that same quality.”

“I’d like to get into the movies, actually,” I said. “Any advice you could give—?”

“Oh, wish I could help, but the business has changed so! Industry’s smashed to smithereens! Studios are selling off backlots, costumes, props—they’ve given up! Production’s down, audiences, too. The old town ain’t what it used to be.”

“He’s getting very tired,” Alex repeated.

I took my leave after asking if I might come again.

“Yes, yes, any time,” said Victor Strange, while

Alex's expression went sour.

Shortly after I got home the sound of a crash brought me out to the hallway. A car was turtled at the curve, and I saw what people escaping from an overturned vehicle do first: Hug each other.

Filed it away in my actor's memory.

– MY HOLLYWOOD MEMOIR –

My Hollywood
Memoir
and Other Fiction

Steven Key Meyers

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ISBN 979-8-9850215-2-3

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