

II. *That’s My Story*

1.

“JUST SEE THE LITTLE MAN STRUT!” my boss murmured in awe. “Richest man in California!”

“He looks like the Monopoly man,” I said.

Mr. Thomas laughed, because it was true. The codger coming towards us, lifting his knees high, resembled the board-game mascot in every detail: He had the top hat, the brushy white mustache, the morning suit, the gold watch-chain across his plump belly, patent leather shoes and *spats*. A jewel topped his walking stick, and into his right eye was screwed a *monocle*. That monocle marked the only difference between the Monopoly man on the game box, game board, game cards and Mr. Andrew Cassidy, the richest man in California.

His cars had just arrived at the Dome, in the lead a

pair of motorcycles mounted by men in leather uniforms and leather helmets, followed by a gleaming black Packard V-12 limousine—a custom job with wonderful lines—and, bringing up the rear, a black Packard sedan. Four bulky men in dark suits piled out of the sedan and, doing a kind of marching-band number, took their places, two flanking the limousine’s door, facing each other, and two at the Dome’s entrance, hands held loosely at their sides, eyes flicking around the empty sidewalk. *Bodyguards. Gunmen.*

Waiting in his car was a blonde woman swaddled in furs—*furs*, in *September*, in *Los Angeles*. Not that she wasn’t gorgeous, but there was something a little hardened to her, something *varnished*. I expected she was his daughter or granddaughter. After retouching her lips, she put down her compact and blew me a kiss. Gaping, I turned to find Mr. Delbert scowling past me. He nudged me to open the door.

I pushed it open and the tycoon entered with a sidewise glance: “*Someone I should know? I think not.*” The monocle made his watery eye enormous, but instead of the Monopoly man’s well of benevolence, it was an aperture to hellfire.

“Good morning, Mr. Cassidy,” said Mr. Thomas. “Would Mrs. Cassidy care to come inside where it’s cooler?”

“Good morning, good morning. No, thank you, Mr. Raven, my wife’s fine where she is. I’m just here to— Well, you know why I’m here.”

“Indeed,” said Thomas Raven.

“Always liked this room,” Cassidy remarked, waving his stick about. “Now, where’s your brother?”

“Right here, Mr. Cassidy,” said Delbert Raven.

The Dome was the Raven brothers’ Westwood Village headquarters—HQ, sales office, monument to their company and their aspirations. From the outside it resembled a baroque church, but indoors was like a bank—a thick-walled structure topped by a towering dome over a terrazzo-floored rotunda, offices tucked in behind. The dome’s underside was frescoed in signs of the zodiac, and from it hung electroliers enameled in blue and gold, the colors of the neighboring University of California at Los Angeles; every streetlight in Westwood was similarly enameled blue and gold. Mine was one of the desks in the rotunda, among easels displaying renderings and maps.

Mr. Thomas making to escort him to his office, Cassidy said, “No, no, can do this right here,” and slipped a silk-gloved hand into his jacket’s breast pocket with that shirring sound of silk touching silk. “Just wanted to hand-deliver this month’s cheque from the Caldego Oil Company: \$8,781. Smidgeon less than last month, but not too shabby, eh?”

The Monopoly man beamed as Mr. Thomas lavished admiration on the cheque. Mr. Delbert looked less joyful.

“Thank you, Mr. Cassidy,” said Mr. Thomas. “Good of you to bring it by.”

“Happy to. So how’re your Bruins coming along?” The magnified eye flashed. “Bought yourself any ringers yet?”

“No, have you?” Mr. Delbert replied.

“Team’s in championship form this year,” Mr. Thomas assured him. “Lots of great kids coming up.”

“Glad to hear it. After your last season? And the one before that, and— Well, they’ll have their work cut out with my Trojans. When’s that game?”

“October 26,” said Mr. Delbert. “UCLA *versus* USC, Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum.”

“October 26,” echoed Cassidy. “First time in three years, eh? Destined to be a great gridiron rivalry, mark my words. Gentlemen care to make a wager?”

“Certainly,” they said at the same moment. The brothers weren’t twins—Mr. Delbert was 18 months older than Mr. Thomas—but they looked a lot alike, lived next door to each other, were both divorced, and when you worked for them you realized they thought alike, too.

“Capital,” said Cassidy. “Let’s keep it—what’s that word my wife likes?—let’s keep it *prudent*. How about ten shares of Caldego Oil, \$1 par value per share. That too rich for you?”

The Ravens looked at each other. I thought they liked what they heard, but didn’t want to show it.

“All right,” said Mr. Delbert. “You’re on.”

And they shook hands, the brothers managing to look grim while Cassidy chortled.

“Cheer up, gentlemen,” he said. “You haven’t lost yet. Probably you’re too sharp for an old man like me, but I never could resist a little bet. Anything to encourage the youngsters.”

Cassidy was the University of Southern California’s biggest booster, as the Ravens were of UCLA. He’d lately donated USC’s campus crown jewel, Cassidy Memorial Library, in honor of his dead only son. It cost him more than a million dollars. The Ravens, of course, had sold the State the site for

UCLA’s campus for a cool two million under market value, intending Westwood Village—their development abutting it that they liked to proclaim *The Second Hollywood*—to prosper from its proximity. However, it being 1935, not much was happening. Hence, keeping the bet to ten bucks seemed to me, too, to be prudent.

With more shirring of silk, Cassidy’s hand delved back into his breast pocket.

“I give you your cheque?”

“You did, Mr. Cassidy. Thank you.”

“Wife says my memory’s one minute long these days. Well, then, gentlemen, until next month. And see you at the game, too: Troy *versus* Bruins, Coliseum, on— What’s that date?”

“October 26, Mr. Cassidy. See you there.”

Knees high, humming a merry tune, stick tapping the pavement at every step, the Monopoly man toddled back to his limousine in another spectacle of bodyguards falling in behind and chauffeur opening the door to his discontented-looking wife.

The motorcycle escorts kicked their engines into thunder and the procession drove off up Westwood Boulevard.

AN EXCITING FIVE MINUTES, to have the richest man in the state with us, but after he was gone, and the office boy sent running to the bank, the Dome settled down to its usual torpor.

The Raven brothers had multifarious interests, but the sales office, where I was in my third week of work, was where they sold—*tried* to sell—lots and houses in Westwood. The Dome and its few

neighbors poked up out of mostly bare hills and flats like a frontier town (well, a frontier town with a 170-foot tower rising over its Fox Theatre, and palms being planted along the boulevards).

I sat down at my desk and shared a smile with my colleague Doreen at hers. That the Dome looked and felt like a bank, Mr. Delbert told me, conveyed solidity and trustworthiness to people who, we hoped, would pay thousands for lots that, at the moment, hosted nothing more than a few untroubled lizards. I'd heard the brothers declare that the Depression didn't trouble them, that the future of Los Angeles real estate, which they owned so much of, was as glittering as ever. But that didn't prevent us who worked for them from observing that things were tight and getting tighter.

Oh, was selling those lots slow going.

But after a malted-milk lunch across the street at Crawford Drugs, I was pleased to see returning to the Dome a couple I'd met the day before, Mr. and Mrs. Willard, he a shoe-store owner who told me his wife deserved a nice new home.

I'd pulled out the maps, the plats, the blueprints and floor plans, interrogated Mrs. Willard as to her tastes and preferences discussed down payments, mortgages, interest rates and contractors, run them uphill in the office Essex on newly-paved streets, led them through two model homes, and conducted them over the scrub to an overlook where, I told them, they might build, say, a four-bedroom, two-bath Spanish Mission-style house with a view taking in the whole Los Angeles Basin. Sweeping my arm from the just-opened Griffith Observatory past Downtown,

Catalina Island, Beverly Hills, Santa Monica and Malibu, I quoted a price of \$15,000, \$1,500 down. They’d blanched, begged for a night’s consideration, and were silent all the way back to the Dome.

But now they were back. I stood up smiling and put out my hand, and Mr. Willard, nodding nervously, shepherded his wife past my desk to Doreen’s.

I sat down again. Doreen was a very pretty girl a little younger than myself, a capable receptionist but—even if she *was* showing me the ropes—not a salesman. There were no female salesmen, of course.

The one thing Doreen had neglected to teach me was how to poach someone else’s client. She took the Willards behind the scenes for an hour before walking them to the door and giving them a showy send-off.

So I sat studying floor plans, answered the phone the few times it rang, watched out for walk-ins, bade the Ravens goodnight as their chauffeurs pulled up their respective Cadillacs nose-to-tail for the trip to Holmby Hills, and at 5:00 o’clock went home myself.

The Depression was awful, of course, a disaster, a nightmare you couldn’t wake up from or kick free of, but in our office, at least, it had its leisurely aspect, too.

As usual Doreen and I walked together down to our Red Car stop on Santa Monica Boulevard. She lived in Hollywood, and I further east in Pasadena, so we could share the first leg of my epic trip home.

“I saw the Willards,” I told her once we were seated.

“Yes, Bing, sorry about that,” she said. “And thanks for taking care of them yesterday: You set the

hook. Not landed yet, but they're thinking about it. She was a suffragette, that's why they wanted me.

"But Bing, some people, when they come in with questions, they're looking for information, sure, but also want a guide, a helping hand, *encouragement*. Reassurance they're doing the right thing spending so much on themselves. Goodness me, \$3,000 just for a lot! Ten or twelve thousand more for a house! Some of our customers might find you a little intense, a little too serious."

"The curse of being an engineer."

I smiled, but she was right. Selling real estate wasn't my calling, and never would be. My calling was engineering, but where were there any jobs in it?

We were coming up to her stop, Western Avenue.

"But you'll get the hang of it, I know you will," she said. "'Night, Bing."

"'Night, Doreen."

Several blocks up, almost catty-corner from the Central Casting building at Hollywood Boulevard, I could see the boarding house where her mother rented rooms to aspiring actresses come to try their luck in Tinsel Town.

It occurred to me I should ask Doreen out.

2.

THOUGH MY JOB at the Dome wasn’t a good fit, having any job at all was a godsend. Mine came about through my uncle, Jim Groves.

I wrote about Uncle Jim in *The Last Posse*, if you read it. In 1922 he was Sheriff of Texas’ Wilbarger County when, 12-year-old me at his side, he led the posse that by automobile and on horseback tracked down and captured Frank Holloway, the notorious *Oklahoma Yeggman* with seven notches on his guns, one for every man he’d killed. Uncle Jim helped me grow up at that challenging age; little did I know he was about to wake me up at the grown but slumbrous age of 25.

I’d come home to Dad’s in the middle of August a fresh Ohio State University Ph.D. in chemical engineering. Matriculating at 18 in 1928, I’d earned my bachelor’s degree, my master’s, finally my doctorate with a dissertation on *Behavior of Waxes in High-Temperature Environments*. Won’t bore you with the details, but it’s in the petrochemical line of things.

I loved the field, loved school, loved plowing my way through the requirements, helped at first by Dad, then—when the Depression started to bite—taking

campus jobs, summer jobs and finding scholarships and assistantships. Now I opened my eyes for the first time in seven years, a new-minted doctor ready to snatch up a job with brilliant prospects—and there weren't any.

No jobs. None, not anywhere, even for a *cum laude* Ph.D. from OSU! Not in Texas, nor Pennsylvania, not in Ohio or Louisiana. The country so prosperous when I plunged into my studies was, when I emerged, a poorer, more sullen place where, if I wanted to eat, I had to put my training aside and take whatever I could get.

Luckily, Dad welcomed me home. He was a schoolteacher, respected and senior, and my step-mother Violet was a popular teacher as well, and though I remember from my earliest days Mom and Dad (she taught, too, until her death) saying they'd never get rich, the job was steady and, in Pasadena even in the Depression, secure. Pasadena's better off than you might know and, to the eye, at least, the Depression didn't change that. While the rest of Los Angeles seemed to lose vibrancy and color, to go from Technicolor to black-and-white, Pasadena retained what it had before, something of the silents' glamorous silver.

At Sunday supper the week of my tail-between-my-legs homecoming, Uncle Jim congratulated me on completing my studies and took to calling me *Doc*. Which I could have done without. But kindly as ever, and apparently glad to see his little deputy again.

He was my Mom's favorite brother, and always great friends with Dad. Despite being in California for three years, but for the missing star he was still every

inch the formidable figure he’d been when we tore off across the Panhandle in pursuit of Frank Holloway. Of course he was older now, in his 50s, thicker, thin on top, mustache gray, peering out from creased, sunburned skin.

In other words, a hayseed in a white Stetson, twill shirt, bolo tie, fringed jacket and dungarees. Embarrassing, considering we weren’t in Texas any longer, but in California. At least he’d given up cowboy boots for a crepe-soled shoe easier on his feet. To me, his get-up made him look like a hick.

We reminisced about his putting me into long pants after I arrived in Vernon wearing short pants; part of his overhaul that took me from spoiled pretty boy to toughened-up kid who better knew how to take things as they come.

And after hearing my tale of woe, Uncle Jim said he’d talk to his boss about finding me a job. This startled me, but I was willing. What kind of job, though?

He was working, he said, for a Holmby Hills family that had a real-estate business. Said they were always on the lookout for bright youngsters. And what did *he* do for them? He was their night watchman. *Watchman?* Seemed a comedown to me, though I didn’t say anything.

“But why would they give *me* a job?”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Doc,” said Jim. “I’ll speak with Mr. Thomas Raven and let you know.”

Good as his word, he called a few days later and told me when to present myself at the Dome in Westwood Village. I duly met Mr. Raven and his brother, was hired and started the following Monday.

It was a job, and I was happy to hand over my weekly draw to Dad as rent, and grateful to Uncle Jim, but after three weeks I had yet to earn my first commission and knew that selling real estate wasn't for me.

THE SUNDAY FOLLOWING my personal encounter with Andrew Cassidy, Jim came over to Dad's as usual. After eating Violet's famous roast beef we resumed the Monopoly game that had already consumed two Sundays. It was new that year, in the depths of the Depression. No one had any money, so getting notionally rich in railroads or hotels was very appealing.

I'd been waiting for this moment to regale everybody with the Monopoly man's visit to the Dome, and soon had them in stitches—but unexpectedly it stirred stuff up, too.

Jim growled, "Malevolent old bastard." Immediately he apologized. "Sorry, Violet, that just slipped out."

"No more than the truth, Jim," she asserted in a way strong for her, and to my amazement there emerged the story of how Cassidy harmed her people years earlier when he was buying drilling rights on Signal Hill in Long Beach, and getting them for a song since no one suspected there might be oil in the ground there.

But Cassidy's uncanny instincts told him that petroleum lay beneath Violet's parents' bungalow. They took his modest offering of cash, and before they knew it derricks sprouted from front lawn and back yard and they had to move out. A few royalty

cheques that soon ceased didn’t make up for the loss of their home.

“Lots of stories like that about Cassidy,” Dad murmured.

“Thought he was supposed to be some great philanthropist,” I said. “Cassidy Library? Easy touch for Catholic charities?”

They filled me in on how Cassidy amassed his money in the first place – on his decades of taking and grabbing, bald-faced thievery, bribery, *murder*, and how throughout his career he’d impoverished anyone fool enough to become his partner.

His masterpiece was going to be the Teapot Dome. To get his hands on the U.S. Navy’s oil reserves, he bribed the Secretary of the Interior. Who went to prison. While Cassidy got off scot-free.

“Scot-free, ‘less you count his son,” Jim noted. “For no good reason made his son his bagman – had him deliver \$100,000 *cash* to the Secretary. Then on the eve of telling Congress all about it, the son ends up on the oriental rug of his bedroom in Beverly Hills with a bullet in his brain. With his secretary-*friend* lying a dozen feet off in a similar condition.”

Why didn’t I know about this? Oh yes, my years studying at Ohio State.

“Suicide? Murder?”

“Both, I’d say,” Jim replied. “Apple doesn’t fall far. Cassidy’s one of those where everybody in the vicinity’s going to come to a bad end. If he’s alive, he’s stealing and killing. He’ll stop only when he’s dead.”

From my mellow uncle this was so surprising a speech that I stared.

“Memory serves, Jim,” Dad said gently, “you had dealings with Cassidy yourself?”

“Years ago,” he answered, “and I do not care for the man.”

And speaking slowly, in a rumbling voice that compelled attention, Uncle Jim explained how, after deciding he was getting too old to be Sheriff, he went into the oil business with his brother Eustace. In those days there was quite a bit of oil around Vernon, Texas. The famous Electra oilfield on the Waggoner Ranch south of town was near the ranch where Jim and Eustace grew up.

The brothers leased land west of town, drilled—and hit oil. Not a big producer, only about 100 barrels a day, but it made them think they’d found a new field. Looking around for capital to drill another well, they met a man in Wichita Falls who advanced what they needed. He didn’t volunteer whose agent he was, so they didn’t know that accidentally they’d taken Andrew Cassidy into partnership.

In defiance of wildcatter’s luck, their second well was a gusher. It was giving them 2,000 barrels a day, a taste of wealth, and Uncle Jim had just bought a ten-room brick house on Pease Street in Vernon, when Cassidy’s Pan-Hemispheric Petroleum rolled in and started drilling on adjacent leases—and soon Jim’s and Eustace’s gusher was dribbling out only ten barrels a day, then five, before going dry altogether, while new pumpjacks surrounding their wells sawed away merrily.

Jim and Eustace found themselves on the outside looking in on their own venture. Royalties docked to pay back their silent partner, their debts soaring

beyond any possibility of repayment, they underwent the exquisite humiliation of declaring bankruptcy. Jim lost the house and part of his home ranch in nearby Bugscuffle. Luck of the game, Cassidy’s people told him.

Can’t say I followed every detail of Uncle Jim’s story. The oil business is very complicated. But the upshot was that thanks to Cassidy he lost his shirt; but for Andrew Cassidy, he’d be a rich man today.

“Why he bothered with my two-bit affair, I’ll never know. Think a man with two hundred million could let the little guy alone once in a while.”

“Did you say two hundred *million*?” I asked. “*Dollars*?”

“Hell, yes, Doc: *dollars*.”

“Well,” I said after a suitable silence, “he’ll be even richer if USC beats UCLA next month: Made a \$10 bet with the Ravens.”

“Did he now? Ten bucks?”

“Yep, ten shares in the Caldego Oil Company, \$1 par value per share.”

Uncle Jim sat back, looking surprised.

“*Caldego*,” he said. “Don’t mean to brag, but that’s down to me, too. Caldego Canyon’s up from Castaic, past the Valley? The Ravens own a big tract and, what with the Depression, can’t develop it yet, but I was up there with them one day and happened to remark—should learn to keep my big mouth shut—that it looked like oil country to me.

“Well, they actually brought in people who agreed, drilled a well, hit oil—and it was pretty much my experience all over again. In the oil game—trust me—a lot of money goes out before anything comes

in. Another time, they might have built it up slow, learned the business as they went, but they decided to approach the biggest oilman around, and he was only too happy to oblige. So Caldego Oil's their joint venture with Cassidy—own it 50-50. But probably Cassidy's getting most of the benefit.

“Told the Ravens that despite his butter-wouldn't-melt, sweet-old-man appearance, Cassidy's a crook, a viper, a *killer*. Yes, they said, but he knows oil and we don't, so stay out of it. So I do.”

After Jim went home, Dad remarked that he'd never heard the full story of his oil venture.

“Made him a bitter man, and I'm sorry to see it.”

The Oil King spent \$50,000 a year buying athletes for USC under false pretenses. The faculty permitted these husky lumbermen and ranch hands to pass farcical exams – any professor who flunked a quarterback would be looking for another university. Didn’t the Oil King show what he thought of professors by paying a football coach *three times* the salary of the best?

Along with turning college athletics into a swindle came underworld accompaniments – bootleggers, bookmakers and prostitutes. The purpose was to win games, the reward \$200,000 in gate receipts. Of this the whole student body was proud, made one by *college spirit*.

– Upton Sinclair

Oil

(adapted)

Whatsisname, on the road to Damascus.

– William Kennedy

Legs

That's My Story

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