

NORTH ATLANTIC REVIEW



Special Sections

Kevin Donleavy--"Up and Down The Mountain" and "No Bother"

Michelle Campbell--"Rockin' The Dead In Zagreb"

Ed Eriksson--"Old New Mexico"

Steve Matteo--"California Revisited"

William Burns--"Horror Films: The Wreckers of Civilization?"



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**North Atlantic
Review**



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Submissions of poetry (to 1,000 words) and fiction (to 5,000 words) are welcome, along with humor, satire, essays, criticism and book reviews. Send queries for consideration of novel excerpts and narrative poems.

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Vermont Rocks

Guy Prevost

When I was in my early thirties, still young enough to become a wunderkind in the movie business (barely), yet not old enough to be considered a “has been” or “never was,” a series of personal and professional setbacks drove me to seek other sources of income. A friend, whom I shall name the Cynic, owned a small real estate company in one of the LA canyons, and he suggested I join his sales staff, ply a new trade in what I came to call DUST (an acronym for the four components of a home’s value, according to the textbook). I went along, though this was hard for me psychologically, given my early successes, burnished education, and, as I see it now, hypersensitivity to how I was perceived by others. Before, when I was working on spec scripts, flush from winning an award for a documentary at the Humboldt State Film Festival, I would sometimes joke to a potential producer: does the story work, or should I consider a career in real estate? Now this flippant concept had hardened into a grim reality, clashing violently with my self-image. I was an “artist,” not a “salesman.” Federico Fellini, not Willy Loman. Clearly, the field had negative cachet, the bar for entrance (the state exam) was notoriously low, and I shouldn’t have been surprised to find many show biz casualties like myself roaming the caravans, trolling for clients, and sitting on open houses every Sunday afternoon when they’d rather be poolside at a party touting their latest deal. The market was “on fire” – it was the mid-eighties – and I wasn’t the only part-timer trying to make a quick buck.

I heard a man once say that in the film business it’s preferable to be unemployed than to have just “any job,” unless it was worthy of announcement in *Daily Variety*. A weird philosophy if you thought about it, but one that I admit I subscribed to. But necessity and some small smidgeon of self-respect prevailed. The great fear, articulated by the Cynic, himself an ex-actor, was that you go into it *temporarily*,

hoping to make some extra money, and you wind up ten years later, if you're lucky, selling houses to the people who succeeded at what you wanted to do originally. This gave me chills, I must confess.

In any case, I was still in this early phase (the temporary one, that is) and I continued to write and promote my projects wherever possible while hawking my one listing, a hi-tech cliffhanger on a small side street near Coldwater Canyon. But I refused to have sales signs with my name on them, or business cards for that matter. Still, I had to play it both ways with friends and former associates. I'd either not even mention DUST at all, or, make fun of the job, the ludicrous Ludleau Real Estate Academy where you were encouraged to memorize the answers to the state exam by rote (if the name "Woo" is in the question, the answer is "c,"), the corny sales advice to always ask questions that have "yes" for an answer or that imply the client has already bought the house: "Where will your couch go?" Or the funky office with Christmas decorations still abounding in summer and the chalkboard ad for a "partial burn down." At the same time this approach was possibly self-defeating as these were the very people who might be my first much-needed clients. I ran into another sales veteran, a professional Frenchman named Jacques Jabot (they had as many alliterative names in DUST as in show biz), who said the key to success was to be as proud of what you were doing as a Nobel chemist. I wasn't there yet.

Spurred by these discomforts, I began to dedicate my evenings to slavishly re-doing my scripts, dodging the calls from the gaggle of mostly female agents leaving business messages on my answering machine. By the way, former girlfriends had seen "the writing on the wall" long before I did, and had vanished, with one excuse or the other, but it appeared there were some willing to take their place, at least for a while. It took time for certain truths to become self-evident: that I kept my charming one-bedroom apartment in "Beverly Hills Adjacent" thanks only to the city's draconian rent control laws, that I liked to entertain women at home instead of restaurants, not because I loved to cook but it saved money, that my Winter Heat 300 skis were actually bought on remainder at Abercrombies, and that I stayed dry in my classic Mustang convertible only after many torturous hours repairing the holes in my ragtop with a do-it-yourself kit from Pep Boys.

It was on one such evening of script refurbishment when I was no doubt trying different adverbs or changing a character's name, that

the phone rang (and I mean rang, not buzzed, throbbed, or played the first four notes of Beethoven's Ninth, since this was the mid-eighties). I "screened," assuming it would be another Duster but instead I heard a familiar voice and the crackle of long distance.

"Jack, this is Henry Langford, I'm calling from New York and —"

"Hi, Henry."

It had been three years.

"There's a lot to catch up on, but what I need to know from you...is *Blood Sisters* available?"

Was I not staring at a copy of the work next to six others on my plank and cinder block book shelves, the titles neatly inscribed in magic marker?

"Can you come to New York?" he asked. "Take the red eye tomorrow. BJ and I will pick up expenses, and you can stay at the Harvard club. I've given the script to a man I know at Vista Entertainment. Paolo Mancini. He's *very* interested, wants to discuss some changes...and by the way, you would direct."

Deliverance, I thought.

Defying gravity, coming from all directions out of the black cumulus, the houses hurtled through the musky sky. Every style, Cape Cods with illegal add-ons, Dutch Colonials with drainage problems, Tudors with leaky Mansard roofs, "Contemporaries" with egregious easements, "condo alternatives" where someone had been murdered, hillside houses with questionable geological issues—like Dorothy's house in The Wizard of Oz, they smashed through the void. "There's no place like home." (A DUST mantra if I ever heard one!). Somewhere in my murky semi-consciousness I questioned these impossibilities, but their meaning eluded me. A large neo-classic mansion floated by, then its walls began to melt and dissolve into the pockmarked face of a man bearing an uncanny resemblance to Richard Nixon. He was the Wizard, the snake oil salesman, only this time he wasn't selling the bombing of Cambodia but a "canyon fixer," a shack really, perched on a heart-stopping vertical hillside supported by two flimsy-looking stilts, a swimming pool cantilevered to the side. "It's not going anywhere!" his voice echoed in the canyon. "It's been here fifty years and it'll be here for another fifty, long after you're gone." The Young Couple surveyed the pristine canyon view from the deck as the Wizard widened his thin lips in a reptilian smile. Suddenly the ground began to rumble and shake. The wife lurched and clung to a

post for support. She and her husband exchanged wary glances as the Wizard smiled again. Another jolt, the stilts began to buckle like toothpicks, and the house started to slide, gathering momentum. The couple held on for dear life. But a tsunami, stirred by the temblor, leapt from the pool and swept them off the deck into an oblivion of water and masonry and dirt and DUST (Density, Utility, Scarcity, Transferability). And still the refrain bounced off the canyon walls, only it was my voice now: "It's not going anywhere!!"

"Sir?" The flight attendant touched my shoulder. I was awakened as the plane lurched in the turbulence, and I realized that I was at 32,000 feet and outside clouds were hurtling by in the moonlight, but no houses.

"Another gin and tonic, please."

On my lap were two bound pieces of written material. One the script of *Blood Sisters*, which I'd been re-reading for the upcoming meeting. The other, hidden underneath, was the DUST textbook opened to the second page. There was a picture of the Wizard himself, John Ludleau, the founder and chief operating officer of the eponymous real estate academy. Below, his timeless motto: "A quitter never wins and a winner never quits..." Somehow, those words scalded my heart. I had brought this contraband because the following week I was due to take another exam (Ethics!) for my "continuing education."

We were just over Vegas and the flight attendant brought me the drink. I stowed the script and the text in my carry-on and took a long gulp. I cleared my head of DUST and thought of Henry Langford, and what had originally brought us together several years before.

It was a harmless and inoffensive paperback I'd spotted in Brentanos Book Store. In those days I used to hang out there when I was feeling nostalgic for the east, as this particular corner of Wilshire and Rodeo, where Brentanos was located, was particularly Manhattanish. Something about the cover appealed to me, and on a lark I bought the book (*Mares Eat Oats*) and thought it might make a good movie. It was a thriller cum psychological mystery involving an orphaned teenager on the run from an evil espionage agency. It all took place in New England. I made some inquiries (as they say) and was soon on the phone with the producer who had the rights, Henry Langford.

He was in Vermont (a good sign, I had thought). He sounded receptive to my ideas, needed help with the script, and would be more

than happy to meet with me when he returned to LA in a week's time. All in all, it was a long shot (even then), but a favorable outcome. A friend told me that Langford was the producer of several films that I admired, that he was a Harvard graduate, and that he was an excellent tennis player, which for me, was very good news.

I felt even more optimistic as I turned my Mustang up Langford's private drive near the top of Benedict Canyon. Instead of the iron portals that protected the grandiose compounds of movie magnates, here was a rustic wood gate. It opened the way up a winding road to what appeared to be a lovely old farmhouse, modest by Hollywood standards. In the cobblestone parking area were no Jaguars or Lamborghinis, but a VW, a jeep, and a vintage Austin Healy of "British Racing Green." The dark wood of the house was matched by fencing that enclosed the rambling grounds. The house, though hidden from the road, had a beautiful view of the canyon, but it certainly didn't look like California. There didn't seem to be a palm tree in sight.

The only bow to lotus land was the obligatory Jacuzzi, next to the garage. Leading uphill from the Jacuzzi was a lattice of scaffolding built around an ascending arrangement of rocks and boulders. A man was poised halfway up the hill, intently surveying the project as I drove up.

Roused from his concentration, he climbed down to the parking area. Hardly the lean aristocrat his name may have suggested, Henry was a pleasant-looking man in his early forties, just slightly overweight. His blue eyes stood out, he sported a carelessly trimmed moustache, and he was casually dressed in work shirt, jeans, and weathered topsiders. He greeted me warmly, "You must be Jack." He saw me looking at the rocks, which I now realized were some kind of synthetic material.

"We're not finished yet. It's going to be a New England stream leading down to a pond with the Jacuzzi. In fact, you'll have to excuse me if we're interrupted during our meeting. An art director is coming by to consult on the rocks. Melanie and I want them to look exactly like the ones in Vermont. This guy did the rides at Magic Mountain and worked on *Raiders*." It was a strange idea, but one which, given how I clung so desperately to my own identity as an easterner, charmed me. As did Langford himself, whose use of first names made me perfectly at ease as he led me inside.

Normally, I'd be indifferent to a house. But this was, well, a place I would have loved to live (would now, in fact, if it still existed).

The New England theme was held consistently. The floors in the living room were dark stone. The walls were whitewashed and un-sanded. The bookshelves, which Henry told me he was still working on, were comfortably stocked with classics and hard covers, surrounding a limestone fireplace. As we passed through the kitchen, I saw no signs of servants. Dishes from the previous evening were still piled in the sink.

Henry conducted me finally to the backyard and the black bottom pool which seemed to blend in with the surroundings much as a pond in a New England glen. I heard the pleasant echo of tennis balls being struck on a court which was partially hidden on a plateau above us. There was a nifty trail, stepped with railroad ties, which led up to the court, and I could hear fragments of laughter from the players. Henry asked if I played. I said yes and mentioned that I'd been ranked in the northeast juniors. He seemed genuinely delighted and said we must play sometime.

The sounds of the tennis game stopped and moments later a couple descended the path toward the pool area. The woman caught my eye immediately. She was lean, tall, about twenty-five, and moved with a light nimble grace. Her coloring was pale and lightly freckled, her red hair hung loosely to her shoulders. She was wearing subtly tailored buckskin tennis shorts and matching T-shirt, creating a look of studied casualness. She didn't have movie star good looks, but was still damn provocative. I later would find out that she was "in literary development" for one of the "boutique studios." Her companion was an older man, in his fifties I guessed, with a full head of grey hair.

"Hey, kids, this is Jack Talbot, a young director with some interesting ideas about *Mares*.... This is Portia and David. Jack also plays tennis I understand, ranked in the northeast juniors." To be introduced, as such, in these surroundings – well, my head was spinning.

"That's no mean feat, I'm sure," said the man in a crisp English accent. "Weren't you ranked at one time, Portia?"

"I think I smell a match," said Portia, an inviting challenge.

"Watch out, Jack. She beats us all. Princeton tennis team."

I had to struggle to be nonchalant as Portia and the Englishman strolled into the house. There was business to attend to. As the couple departed in the Austin Healy, its engine purring down the canyon, I plunged into my thoughts about *Mares Eat Oats*.

We were over Kansas (Dorothy's state) and the captain turned

off the seat belt sign as I stirred myself from this reverie. I wondered if Henry had changed and if I should tell him about DUST. Best not to, I thought. Finesse and maintain the appearance of prosperity, at a critical stage. I looked forward to seeing him. He was someone I'd always liked, though he'd suddenly and mysteriously dropped out of sight, and I quite naturally had wondered where he'd landed. Well, New York. That was fitting, that he'd go back east. I had appreciated, at that earlier time, his deft handling of the movie scene. He was a gentleman producer, terrific with the story and getting along with the talent, clever at setting up the deal, keeping the thing together, but one who generally didn't have to "get his hands dirty." And he was the opposite, it seemed, of the stereotyped producer, the cigar-smoking thug who never finished college, came out to Los Angeles, and clawed his way up the studio ranks. The son of a famous painter, Henry had gone to school with some hot directors of the late sixties, and had parlayed those associations into producing an Academy Award nominated picture. Apart from all that, he had created this oasis of the east in the land of the philistines, a true work of art.

No, I wouldn't mention DUST to Henry, though he might get a kick out of it. How when I asked Ludleau the stylistic difference between a Cape Cod and a Dutch Colonial, excepting the fact that on the state exam the picture of the Cape Cod had a garage and the DC didn't, he scowled and said, "I don't know, I don't know anybody who does, and remember: Don't clutter your mind with anything that is not essential to bringing in an offer!" Not exactly the Socratic method of our liberal arts colleges, eh, Henry?

Though Henry appreciated my "input" on *Mares*, it was clear that my career had not "ripened" to the point where I would be an asset to the project. But while I didn't find a job, I found a friend and - new scene. Henry was pleased with my tennis game - I have a classic style, not relying on the cut, slice, and chop of many parvenus to the game, that is former players of team sports who turned to tennis or golf as they reached their thirties. And it wasn't the first time that I noticed my tennis prowess was more interesting to producers than, say, my documentary on lobster fisherman in Maine. We started to play three mornings a week. It was Henry's idea. A good way to "set up the day," he'd say. And this led to other activities at the farmhouse, which included impromptu soirees that he and Melanie hosted. These were different from what I imagined Hollywood gatherings to be like. There was an assortment of creative people, some who had worked on my

favorite films of the sixties, and the atmosphere was casual and friendly. There was an editor who worked for Rafelson, and an actress, Amanda Pratt, who had been the subject of my own fervent teenage fantasies when I'd seen her in an early Robert Altman movie. Melanie, herself a former actress, was an excellent cook, a specialist in wonderful peasant stews, pastas, and risottos, and the dinners lacked any trace of formality. And throughout they treated me as an equal, because Henry had given me his genuine stamp of approval. There was the christening party for the Vermont stream, the sailing outings on the editor's yacht, and the constant tennis gatherings. And there was Portia...

Like many Directors of Development she was a bright woman with a degree in English (from Princeton, no less, one of the first female graduates). Yet she seemed different than the prototype. She didn't seethe with ambition, or at least not obviously, and she conveyed a skeptical view of her employers, clearly pitching her tent in the writers' camp. Above all she had a special talent for establishing an immediate sense of intimacy, as if you had been friends for years. Like the time I was lounging alone at the farmhouse and she approached drying her hair, after showering. She wore a rumpled white dress shirt and blue seersucker shorts. The shower had brought color to her cheeks and she touched my shoulder gently as she sat down.

"When are we going to have that match?" she asked.

Several months into this halcyon time, his projects apparently simmering at various studios, Henry decided to take Melanie on a sojourn to Europe and he asked me to stay at the farmhouse to look after things. Portia dropped by one afternoon, and we finally played tennis. Her game was extraordinary. Her ground strokes were deep and explosive. Her grace and lightness of foot were catlike, as she seemed effortlessly to get to each ball. For myself, I hadn't played so well in years. What began with a competitive edge dissolved into the sheer pleasure of long baseline exchanges that finally seemed hypnotic, almost timeless. After a while, the only sound seemed to be that wonderfully satisfying plunk of the ball on the racket, resonating off the canyon walls.

Later we had a drink under the *Cinzano* umbrella by the court. Gregson, her English boyfriend, was in London, working on the re-write for the next *James Bond* movie, she told me. Still flush with the enchantment of the game, we ambled down to the Vermont pond. Something was brewing - and it went both ways. I turned on the motor to start the water cascading down over the rocks. Portia sat down on

the flagstone bordering the pond, removed her tennis shoes and socks, and stretched her long legs in the water. We were silent for a moment, enveloped in the white noise of the stream.

"It is like Vermont, I guess," she said smiling, lowering the bottom half of her willowy body into the pond. I could see her buckskin shorts darkening as she brushed back a wisp of hair from her forehead. I took off my shoes and socks and slipped in beside her.

For three days we stayed at the farmhouse, and didn't receive any guests.

But by mid-week, after we came down from the canyon and retreated to our own apartments, Portia started to distance herself. "You know I'm crazy about you," she said over the phone, and she followed with ambivalent statements about "timing" and "complications." She seemed confused and concerned about Gregson who, she confessed, had just returned from being brutally "beaten up" by his producers over the *James Bond* re-write. Her main concern was not to threaten him at this moment of vulnerability. Soon she stopped answering my calls. I knew it was over. Just like that.

These heady waters were treacherous, I was beginning to gather. So I finally plunged into work, composing a grisly little tale about a series of mysterious murders at a girls' prep school, which was, perhaps, my unconscious reaction to Portia. This was to become *Blood Sisters*. Henry, meanwhile, seemed a bit glum. I noticed, on the resumption of our tennis games, that he was usually unshaven, that Melanie was seldom around, and that he might resort to a post-game cocktail, which was a trifle early at 11 AM. He asked what I was up to and I mentioned BS. He said he'd like to take a look at it, just to see what these kind of projects looked like.

Several days later I arrived for our usual match. I could hear the poignant strains of Mahler's *Adagietto* blasting all the way down the drive. I was surprised to find that Henry wasn't dressed for tennis. Instead he was wearing a freshly pressed shirt, was clean shaven, and scrubbed. In the sky-lit living room, standing between giant speakers, he finished "conducting" the orchestra through its poignant climax. His eyes were alert and alive. He turned to me and smiled. "Let's forget about tennis today," he said. "Let's talk about *Blood Sisters*."

We sat by the pool. "I haven't read anything as exciting in years," Henry said. "I love the whole flavor of the piece: the girl characters, their first days at school, their summer memories, their secrets... And meanwhile, there's this menace in their midst...it is so

right...the sins of the mothers must be visited on their daughters.” I had hinted at the Old Testament themes obligatory to such tales, but never expected them to be taken so seriously.

“I’ve already, if it’s OK with you, set up appointments for us at all the studios. And you will direct. I’ll fight for that!”

I was transported. This great friend, this connoisseur, the man who had singlehandedly conquered Hollywood without tears, was now becoming my patron—and my producer.

The pilot announced we were over Pennsylvania, he was trying to dodge some thunderstorms and there would be more turbulence. I stared at the pages of *Blood Sisters*, made a few more notes – savvy to the fact that now, after two years, the murders were a bit tame. Just about the time that Henry became involved, there was a terrific sleeper hit, an indie made on a shoestring, with a plot line not unlike that of BS. It had led to a string of vaguely similar imitations, disguising their lack of originality with more graphic murders. I wasn’t sure that Henry was aware of this, but felt it would be my duty to educate him. “Always ask questions that have yes for an answer.” Ludleau’s words, for some reason, floated into my brain. Perhaps I should practice this selling tip on Mancini in New York. I leaned back comfortably. The Harvard Club. That would be a trip. The city would be abuzz with the Statue of Liberty’s 100th birthday – and the Fourth of July celebrations. Not to mention Wimbledon on TV. It was an exciting time, and things were definitely looking up.

In that previous incarnation, though I had cash offers to option BS, there was no question that I’d go with Henry. So I had simply given him the option and kicked back to await commencement of production. But Henry was rudely turned down by everyone in town. His clout, based on that Academy Award nomination, had faded with time. I began to realize that BS was not one of a slate of Henry’s projects, it was his *only* project. Undaunted, Henry lowered our sights to the “exploitation companies.” But where the majors complained of too much violence, the others complained of too little.

Still, I never questioned Henry’s commitment. And after all, friendship was more valuable than a deal, not to mention being a farmhouse regular with full court privileges. But sadly, even these benefits were short-lived. One evening Melanie came home to find Henry in the Vermont pond with Amanda Pratt. Though not the first of Henry’s peccadilloes, it was his last - at the farmhouse anyway. Henry

showed up at the door to my apartment that evening, in need of a place to stay. In the bitterness of the break up, Melanie had told Henry to leave on the spot. Over drinks into the early morning Henry told me it was Melanie's house, not Henry's, or even shared between them. Though he had originally found the house as a "fixer upper", contributed years of "sweat equity," Melanie had bought it exclusively with her own money from a prior divorce settlement.

The last time I'd seen Henry was the morning after he crashed on my couch. He stayed with Amanda Pratt for a while, never called, and then I heard through Portia that he moved back east.

* * *

Henry welcomed me with a hearty dinner at Gallagher's Steak House on Madison near 86th Street. He brought along DC, his friend, a former make-up man, and now his partner on the project. They treated me with extreme deference, a welcome change from my diminished status on all fronts out west. It was good to see Henry again. He had definitely aged, but still radiated the same warmth. The main difference was his teeth. He'd had them capped, so they appeared just a shade too white. He was dressed in the proverbial preppy Oxford shirt, accentuated by an ascot, which I thought was an unfortunate deviation from his casual ethos and made him look older and even a bit stuffy. But he still wore the topsiders. DC wore a herring bone jacket and tie. I sported my jacket of "distressed leather," in keeping with my role as writer/director.

"I haven't spoken in too much detail with Mancini yet, but I gather the main thing he's looking for are more murders."

"Henry said you already had some ideas," said DC eagerly. I was ready to roll.

"First, we knock off one of the girls on the way to school, she is *strangled* on the train, so we have our first shock on page 3, not page 30. Then, Melissa, the other roommate, stumbles across evidence, so Miss Harris tosses her down a well on page 40, and the body is never found..." I could see Henry and DC were soaking this up. "What's more," I said, warming to their rapture, "We've got a prep school, so why not play it to the hilt. The school is a *character* in its own right, drenched in tradition!"

"Drowning in tradition!" DC almost shouted, drawing the attention of nearby diners.

"It all ties in so perfectly with the theme," said Henry, picking

up the ball. “The traditions are *eating away* at the very foundations of the institution.” Which unfortunately reminded me of termites (dry wood or subterranean), a recent subject of Ludleau study.

“Right,” said DC, taking another sip of his brandy. “And how about this, Jack...” They went on riffing, in what I called “development hyperspace,” that twilight zone of story conferences where each notion seems like a breakthrough, each idea an inspiration. It’s only later, when the ideas have to be written down, that things get a little touchy.

“I’m sorry, but I couldn’t get you into the club. This is a terrible week for it, with the Statue of Liberty celebration.” So Henry explained after dinner in the cab why we were headed for the fallback lodging, his “new lady’s” apartment. Though disappointed, I was relieved to discover that these digs were a spacious three-bedroom at 95th and Fifth, right across from the park. It was the kind of elegant building that had a marquee and a doorman. I was also impressed by “the lady” Alice, and she confirmed that Henry hadn’t lost his touch with women, nor his penchant for leaving a New England stamp on every residence he occupied, however temporarily. In the entrance I noticed a neatly stacked pile of old wood timbers, some of which Henry had already installed as beams in the living room.

Alice was a trim woman in her early forties, very attractive, still in great shape, which she took no pains to hide as she was wearing a pair of silk gym shorts and a T shirt. She had blond hair, just slightly streaked with grey, and what people called “good bone structure.” She welcomed me with a gin and tonic.

“The promising young director,” she said in a husky voice. Well, I figured, it was a little late to be a true wunderkind. It was all relative. I sipped the drink and enjoyed the reception.

For a while, we spoke about the timbers, which Henry had salvaged from an old train station in New Hampshire. Alice, evidently crazy about him, affectionately called it his “nutty New England thing.” When she heard the subject of BS, Alice got excited. She’d attended just such a school when she was a girl and dragged out her old annual, which Henry unabashedly claimed would be valuable for research. Alice sat down next to me to show her old class photo: “Look at those hairdos!” she said.

Later, the two of them escorted me to the bedroom of Alice’s thirteen-year-old son, who was away at camp. “I hope you don’t mind staying in Morgan’s room,” she said. I replied that was fine and she

retreated. Henry clasped my shoulder.

"I'm glad you came. I have great hopes for this project. And I love the new ideas you've come up with."

"Thanks, Henry." He shuffled for a moment, as if he didn't know what to say.

"How's Portia?"

"Portia, I guess she's OK. I haven't seen her for a while." Then it struck me. Had he slept with her too? I didn't want to pursue it.

"Too bad it didn't stick," he said. "But it was tough competing with Mr. 007. Maybe, once we get *Sisters* off the ground. Wait until you're a success, Jack. Then you'll have your pick of the women... So, tomorrow we get to work. The meeting's Tuesday, as I told you. Sorry about the Harvard Club. Good night."

Standing alone in the teenager's room, I noticed a school plaque propped up on a dresser, and it reminded me of my own "country day" school which also had a heraldic crest with a Latin motto emblazoned on a banner below. I thought of the scholastic flavor of the script, and how Henry still clung to his associations with Harvard, which now seemed rather pathetic. And my own "good schools." I could still translate the Latin on the plaque: "Perde sed caute." "Proceed, but with caution." Something of a contrast to the motto of the Ludleau academy ("A winner never quits..."). I wasn't sure that either one of them would be much use to me now.

For the second time that day I presented myself to the security guard in the lobby of the Vista Entertainment headquarters, on 41st near Broadway. Unlike most such personnel, this hatchet faced Mafiosi seemed like he might have actually fired his gun in anger. Since he'd seen me once already, he waved me by without much fuss. Earlier, when I'd come with Henry, he eyed us carefully and called upstairs for clearance. This had obviously offended Henry's sensibilities, as he huffed in the elevator afterward.

It was a scuzzy unglamorous building, nothing like the glitzy air-conditioned offices of a Hollywood studio. This was down and dirty filmmaking. No frills, just "the goods," Vista Entertainment style, exemplified by the poster hanging in Mancini's office. For a film called *The Nest*, the artwork displayed a giant cockroach mating with, or eating, a half-naked woman. As for Mancini, he could have been the security guard's twin brother.

Henry and I had spent the previous week doing the re-write, between viewing of Boris Becker tearing through the Wimbledon field at age 18 (a true wunderkind!) and the festivities surrounding the

Statue of Liberty's 100th birthday. It didn't go well. I thought Henry was headed in an un-commercial and un-writable direction, concentrating on dream sequences, flashbacks, and, his prize idea, watercolors painted by our villainess, the avenging dorm mother, Miss Harris. Henry, god bless him, was still interested in "art" and "theme." But I could feel the ominous vibrations of the Ludleau text emanating from the recesses of my suitcase, saw the need for "body count" and more elaborate murders. We were fighting for our lives. To make my point, I insisted that we watch the videos of the countless horror prototypes of the past several years. But Henry had no taste for seeing teenagers garroted, skewered, buried alive, suffocated, slashed to bits, etc.. After a few minutes of watching he'd go to the den to cheer Becker on the other TV, or he'd disappear into the pantry and I'd hear the tinkle of ice.

Of course I'd been right. "Can't she be electrocuted in the bathtub!!!!?????" had been Mancini's outcry in the earlier meeting. During our re-write, I'd decided to steer a politic course, inserting the occasional flashback and "watercolor montage" into the story, while juicing up the killings – but only to a point. I saved the best murder for the meeting, hoping to impress with my creative spontaneity. So when Mancini asked about "electrocution," I countered with my *tour de force*, couching it in Ludleau syntax: "Wouldn't it be a good idea if we have Miss Harris incinerate one victim in a giant pottery kiln donated to the school by a wealthy alumna?" Mancini was duly thrilled; Henry, less so. Throughout the discussion he shifted uncomfortably, stared at his topsiders, fiddled with the threads of his fraying sports coat. I began to worry. But I had a plan and was going to stick with it. As the first meeting ended, I suddenly "remembered" leaving the new script back at the apartment (I'd done this deliberately). I volunteered to go back and deliver it to Mancini myself. Henry, demoralized by the meeting, said he was off to the Harvard Club for lunch, and that we'd meet DC at Gallagher's later.

So now, having been uptown and back, I once again ducked into Mancini's office, this time alone. And just as I'd predicted and hoped, he asked discreetly who really controlled the project and if I might be willing to direct the film *without* Henry and DC's involvement. In fact, I did own the project, since Henry and DC were only "picking up expenses," which Mancini offered to reimburse.

"I really like Henry," said Mancini. "His talents are undeniable. But I don't think he understands this market. There's no room for him in the budget." He went on to say that without him, the film would

definitely happen and I would direct. He had the money, a crew ready from another film which had just wrapped, and the script was actually quite OK. Now *I* shifted uncomfortably, though this was the result I sought. Mancini sensed my unease and suggested I think about it and call him the next day.

Though we'd finished two bottles of wine half way through the dinner at Gallagher's, the mood was less than ebullient. Henry was going on about his visit to the Harvard Club, how they didn't let him in at first because he didn't have a tie, how he forked out twenty-five bucks at the door to buy one, and how he'd finally settled in at the bar there for a few martinis and watched Becker. This was now truly sad – and even insulting. In the cab earlier that morning, Henry pleaded that he had no cash and had stuck me for the fare. He went on to explain to DC that the meeting had gone well and Mancini would probably call us in a few days with his decision.

Henry was slurring his words, and I felt I was definitely within my rights to cut him loose. But as I settled into the post-meal brandy, I thought about loyalty, or lack of it, in Henry's world. He had always treated me well and the next morning I called Mancini and told him I couldn't do the project without Henry and DC. Mancini said he was sorry, and called Henry to say he was "passing."

* * *

A week later, near the curb leading to my hillside listing in LA, I drove the stake holding the company sign into the parched dry ground with a mallet, wielding the tool with great ferocity, imagining the target to be Mancini's heart. This was low-tech stuff, the stake having a crudely tapered end, but after probing for weaknesses in the dirt, I finally set it. For good measure, I added a few crummy sales flags. It was one of those relentlessly hot August days augmented by Santa Ana winds, and I was already drenched in sweat, hardly the cool image Ludleau would like me to cultivate for the open houses. I hopped back into my overpowered convertible, its engine throbbing, temperature gauge inching towards the red zone, and chugged up the twisting canyon road praying the goddamn thing wouldn't blow up before arriving at my destination: the "hi-tech wonder" featuring "Marin style views," and chic "designer carpets." So I had described it in the copy.

The owner, a blond female account executive I had snagged as a client at someone else's open house, was away for the weekend,

water skiing on Lake Mead. I entered, chased down her cat (as per instructions), and sequestered him, not gently, in the garage, so as to avoid his inadvertent escape and ultimate fate as a coyote's lunch. I freshened up in the bathroom and put out a sign-in sheet, prepping it with dummy names (another Ludleau trick) and cranked up the air conditioning. But this particular feature was on the fritz. The vents simply re-cycled the stifling Santa Anas as I settled into the leather couch and gazed out at those "Marin style views," which included some dry scrub and the twists of Coldwater Canyon on the Valley side.

I must have dozed off, because I didn't hear the car, just some voices from the landing above the living room. I usually didn't bother to scope out the visitors anyway. I hated the entire process. Greeting the potential buyers, escorting them through the house (if they were polite enough to follow me), trying to establish rapport. And I was far from following the Ludleau dictum of baking fresh cookies in the kitchen to infuse the air with the warm inviting smell of a home. I generally preferred that the people look around by themselves, while I pretended to be absorbed in reviewing important documents (i.e., *Daily Variety*).

"May we come in?" The voice sounded vaguely Middle Eastern, but also familiar. As usual, I waited coolly at the bottom of the stairs. In the foyer appeared a man dressed in black, right down to his slippers, sporting a ponytail and earrings. He was accompanied by two ravishing women, likewise in black, and I suddenly realized this was Farhad Rezvani, an old friend I'd met at the Humboldt State Film Festival where he had won second prize. He'd made a documentary about his family, transplanted to New York from Tehran.

"Jack, I didn't know you owned a house."

I would like to have crawled into the air conditioning duct. Here it was and I'd have to face it. "Be proud" the Frenchman had said, but that was impossible. I hadn't seen Farhad in years but knew he'd made a fortune doing commercials. I had to tell him that I didn't own the house, but was selling it.

He took it in stride. "I heard you were in New York, making a horror film."

"It didn't work out."

"Too bad."

Farhad told me he was getting into features and was doing so well that he'd moved his parents and numerous other relatives out from New York and was looking for a house.

"This one is too small," he eventually said, "I like the style---hi

-tech. And I like the hills. But I need something three times as big, with a tennis court maybe, and a pool. And a view, preferably facing east. My grandparents are quite orthodox, and they like to pray to the rising sun. Even a vacant lot would be good. Then, I build.”

Later, after extracting the cat from the AC duct, and collecting my flags and signs in the twilight, when it was a little cooler and when my car ran less risk of overheating, I finally headed back over the hill toward Beverly Hills Adjacent.

I now faced the void of Sunday night without plans or prospects, which meant the implementation of the minimalist program for bachelor survival. A stop on South Beverly Drive provided me with the evening’s survival kit: Chinese food and videotapes, each contained in almost identical plastic bags, distinguishable only by the slick logo of their respective establishments, *Panda Kitchen* and *Videothèque*.

Almost stupefied by the heat, the tedium of the open house, the shock of seeing Farhad, I walked into the kitchen of my apartment. There was a mess of empty take-out containers and unwashed dishes, and I was only dimly aware of how this chaos reflected my mental circumstances. I started a superficial clean up, putting the most offensive litter into a plastic trash bag. I reminded myself to load one of the two tape selections, sixties favorites, *before* dishing out the food. Try to restore some order and restraint into your life, I told myself. Meanwhile, the punch of a button unleashed a barrage of messages from the answering machine, all business related. “This is Irma Shore from Merrill Lynch...or Marci Michaelson here from Corliss...how’s the geological up there on ---?” I suppose I should have welcomed the interest. But now it was like a chorus of harpies, an oppressive gaggle of unbearable chatter. As I loaded a tape, Robert Altman’s *Mash*, - not the sucky TV show that had evolved from it - the phone rang once more. I clicked the machine back to “remote answer” and let it do its work.

Clinging to a last shred of dignity by dishing “Deluxe Lo Mein” on to a plate rather than simply inhaling it from the carton, I returned to the living room and prepared a dining area on the coffee table (setting aside a scattering of alumni publications from my former “good schools”).

I snapped on the film and dug into the solo meal. On some back channel of self-awareness I knew I was sinking deeper into a slough of despond and solitude, which, however miserable, afforded a measure

of grim comfort and familiarity.

Two movies and four hours later, I was unable to sleep. I finally resorted to cable channel hopping, mindlessly flipping from “kayak slalom” to an old *Leave it to Beaver* episode. Eventually I became fixated on an infomercial for a real estate company which was showing video tours of their choicest “estate properties.” And suddenly I saw a familiar landscape – I don’t know how I missed it in the daily Hot Sheet. The camera swept over the lovely panorama, revealing the Vermont rocks and the stream, the tennis court – the sun rising in the east over the mountains. And then, even in my state of hibernation and zero function, I thought some dumb luck was coming my way.

It was ten days after I’d sold the farmhouse to Farhad and his father. I’d become the envy of the rival agents in the office, and the Cynic smiled proudly, though he chafed at a little break I gave Farhad on the commission. Still, beginner’s luck, a lucrative deal, and for a little while anyway, I didn’t have to worry about money. Maybe there really would be time for a new film project. At the moment I was simply enjoying my new couch, new bookshelves (not plank/cinder block), new CD player (my first, the latest thing), and the diminished stress due to the total overhaul of the Mustang which I could now drive with no fear of overheating, even on the hottest days.

Soon afterwards Henry called, out of the blue. At first he was in full rage. “That bitch,” he said. “Do you know she hasn’t offered me a cent of her profits? I know what’s happened to property values out there.” He was right. I’d been astonished at Melanie’s half-million dollar windfall. “And I found the place for chrissakes, and encouraged her to buy it, then re-built it with my own hands.” I listened quietly, wondering if his bitterness would extend to me, or if he would ask for a share of the commission. But he settled down as we segued to other topics.

“You know just the other day I was telling somebody about *Sisters*,” he said.

“The version with the kiln murder, or the electrocution?” I asked, and then we both chuckled. He told me he was working with DC in Vermont, starting a business in traditional New England barns. They’d move them off old farms, relocate them on vacant lots, and refurbish them as vacation homes for yuppies. So DUST was everywhere I guess. “Listen, Jack, I understand the buyer is Persian. I’m not prejudiced, but I’m convinced he’s going to paint the house

pink or some goddamn thing. And I don't even have a picture of it, though I lived in it for seven years. Could you go up and take a photo, before that camel jockey shoots the ceiling with cottage cheese or puts up Greek statues?"

That Saturday, when I played in another regular tennis game on another hillside court, I decided to leave early and take the pictures. As I turned through the rustic gate, I was glad to feel not the slightest twinge of nostalgia. But on the way up the drive, I encountered a huge truck, filled with debris. I pulled over to let it pass.

When I reached the parking area, I saw the house had vanished, except for the stone floor that was at this moment being crushed by an incredibly powerful pile driver. *Ker-chunk. Ker-chunk. Ker-chunk.* Parked in the vicinity were various tractors, backhoes, and other equipment. A bulldozer, meanwhile, was grading a wide path up to the tennis court. Near the garage was a trailer where Farhad, in hardhat, was conversing with workers and several family members I'd met during the transaction. As soon as he saw me, Farhad approached.

"Jack! I didn't tell you about this because I knew you were attached to the house emotionally and didn't want it to interfere with the negotiations. We just wanted *the lot*. Beautiful location, the eastern exposure. My grandfather is pleased. My brother is a contractor and we're going to put up a much bigger house. Hi-tech. More room, more light, and a huge dining room! I hope you're not disappointed. You did a great job!"

I thought about it for a moment. He could put up a mosque for all I cared. But I was curious about the bulldozer heading up toward the tennis court.

"We're going to destroy that one tomorrow and cantilever another facing north-south. You play, you know that's better for the light. But Jack, not to worry. The Vermont stream we are keeping. The stream we like."

I hung around for a while until Farhad left with his entourage. I guess I did feel nostalgic after all. I hiked up to the condemned court, the *Cinzano* umbrella in the changeover area flapping in a mild breeze. The only sound was the soft gurgling of the Vermont stream. A real estate flyer, one made up by the selling broker, scudded by my feet. I picked it up. The picture was glossy, in color, and showed the house intact. I thought I'd send this to Henry. A view of the reality would probably kill him. And then I figured it was time to order some sales signs with my name on them.

Just as I was ready to leave, a car zoomed up the drive and

settled in the parking area. It was the Austin Healy. A woman with red hair, dressed for tennis, got out and looked around curiously. She waved.

"I was off to a round robin at Kaczender's but thought I'd stop by to see the wreckage," said Portia as she seemed to glide up to the court. Melanie had evidently brought her up to speed. "Real estate. I never thought that you..." her voice trailed off.

"Only *temporary*. A quick guerilla strike. But I don't need to explain those kind of tactics to you." She smiled, taking the dig good naturedly.

"I guess I deserved that."

"Gregson?" I asked.

"Went back to England. He was applying too much pressure. Would rhapsodize about us spawning little Wimbledon finalists...not for me." She still looked great as we stood in silence for a moment. "It always was a beautiful court," she said. And then, we both had the same idea.

Our rallies were long and intense. She'd lost none of her grace or power. Again the hypnotic rhythm. But I was no longer under her spell. I was out of the web of her enchantment. And as we played, thwacking the ball above the ruins, I thought that maybe the baroque system of illusions that had wreaked such havoc in my life might finally be crumbling, just as the next day the hard court would vanish under the crush of that amazing pile driver.

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Guy Prevost's background encompasses work as a story editor in Hollywood, real estate agent, screenwriter, and college teacher. His stories have appeared previously in this journal and Lively-Arts.com. He has written produced episodes of *Walker, Texas Ranger*, *Dead Man's Gun*, and co-authored the film *Dinoshark*, which aired on the SyFy Channel (2010). Guy lives in Los Angeles with his wife and dog. He's happy to receive your sincerest compliments at GBPrevost@cs.com.

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