

Cold Dogs in the Court Yard

A crossover fan-fiction piece starring Henry Chinaski (of Charles Bukowski's novels) and Philip Marlowe (of Raymond Chandler's).

It was approaching 6.15pm, the sun was packing up for the day but it wasn't quite done yet. The afternoon had been long, hot and sticky. I'd been sitting in my Oldsmobile for over an hour. Waiting for the poet-mailman, the hunchback of East Hollywood. I waited on the street outside his place. A desperate realtor would probably call it a gated apartment complex, but it was a burnt-out flea-bit hovel. Hell, I'd seen stray dogs with better accommodation than that.

I turned another cigarette into a pile of ash as I watched a bum shuffle out of a liquor store up the street. It wasn't until the bum was fumbling with the latch on his satchel that I realised I'd found Chinaski. He slowly shuffled closer; something in his step told me he was already defeated. His US Postal Service shirt was glued to his torso with sweat, his chin told me that gardening shears were the closest thing he had to a razor, and the white knuckles around his brown paper bag gave away just how thirsty he was.

I watched him stroll into the courtyard, pace quickening, he wanted to open that bottle. A blonde girl, only eighteen or nineteen, sat in the courtyard, Chinaski spoke to her in passing. The girl went red in the cheeks, "Only you, Hank!" she managed before erupting in giddy laughter. Chinaski disappeared behind the door of the third apartment, I straightened myself up in the rear-view mirror and went over my information again. Lucinda Rourke. Aged twenty-six. Last seen Sunday morning outside The Whiskey on Sunset Boulevard. Spotted with the writer three nights earlier in a dive at Rossmore and 3rd. She was a hooker, and not a cheap one. Now daddy was bankrolling her return to the family home, hoping she'd leave that business behind. No problem I'd said, if she's still alive.

"Yeah?" He opened the door in just his shorts, there was already half a glass in his hand. Amber, scotch.

"You Chinaski?" I asked, eyeballing the glass, swallowing a mouthful of sand.

"Sometimes." He stared hard. There was life in those eyes after all, something burning someplace deep. He wasn't the defeated bum I'd taken him for. "You a cop?"

"Sometimes" I said. "I'm looking for a girl"

"Aren't we all?" He made a sound that was half laugh and all cough.

"Lucinda Rourke? You seen her lately?"

"Lucy? Sure. Hell of a girl. You her boyfriend?" The corner of his mouth curled into a grin. It was harmless.

"Not quite, are you?"

"Only after a good day at the track" He drained his glass and shuffled through the filthy kitchen to pour another. I leant against the door frame, hoping for a portion of the bottle, but not wanting to touch anything from this kitchen.

"Anyway" he says "cut the bullshit will ya, I haven't got all night."

"When did you last see the Rourke girl?"

"Last Thursday night, we had a drink over at Kadies Bar and then spent the night here screwing and drinking. She was gone by the time I woke up Friday."

"I hear her price tag's a little steep, must've been some day at the track, huh?"

"Heh, I get special rates, Lucy has an appreciation for poetry. Among other things."

"Yeah? Chinaski the poet huh, looks like that's really paying off for ya"

"Well it sure pays better than the alternative" he shrugged.

"Which is?"

"Insanity" Chinaski's eyes lit up as he said the word, and for a moment he was the hobo-savant people had been saying he was.

"So. Are you gonna invite me in or what?" I asked, thinking of the scotch.

"You've gotta be a private dick. What do you think you're gonna find?"

"You're smarter than you look" I said, ignoring the other thing.

"I damn-well better be."

Chinaski didn't seem like a threat. It takes a certain type, and he wasn't it. He was a bum. Smart, but lazy and I didn't believe the hype. He was incapable of murder the same way he was probably incapable of holding a job, it just wasn't in him. He didn't look like the type that'd completed anything, unless it involved a tumbler or a typewriter. I couldn't see a motive, he wasn't in love with her, she couldn't have stolen from him, he had nothing. Chinaski also seemed to lack the sober forethought needed for a ransom job. I decided to cool off on my approach.

"Name's Marlowe" I'd said, offering a handshake. He stood there with his drink staring at my hand like the concept was completely new to him. He smiled. I didn't like it. "Alright." I folded my arms across my chest "How long were you and the girl friendly?"

"Since around the end of February I'd say."

"The two of you were 'doing business' the whole time?"

"Yeah, sure, if you wanna call it that."

"She tell you much about her past?" His hand found his chin, and with a cursory glance to the right, answered "something 'bout her asshole daddy, her running away to Hollywood. Same old story. Gets better every time." That was all I'd needed. "So, is she on the lam or something?"

"Maybe. I'm not there yet" I said.

"Clearly" his glass was nearing empty, as he turned to top himself up I looked through to the next room. There was an old wooden table with a chunky looking typewriter on top. Crumpled paper filled most of the floor space of the room, or at least what I could see from the doorway.

"That's some filing system, Chinaski. Where are all the good ones?"

"Those?" He said, peering into the back room. "Those are rejection letters, I collect them." He turned back to face me. "Are you done?" he asked, and I was. Chinaski was all wrong for the case; he was just a drunk hack one slip up from Skid Row. I doubted he wanted much of anything other than a drink, his words, and the occasional woman.

"I am. Here's my number, get in touch if you hear anything." I handed him a card, which he took and put in the pocket of his shorts without even looking at. "See ya round, Chinaski"

"Hopefully not" he said, shutting the door behind me.