



Los Angeles Stories



Ry Cooder

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City Lights • San Francisco

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All in a day's work

1940



I WORK FOR the *Los Angeles City Directory*, a book of names, addresses, and job descriptions. I am one of many. Our job is to go out and collect the facts and bring them back. Other people take our work and put it in the Book, but we do the important part. Los Angeles is a big city, and the *City Directory* is a big book.

“How would you like to be listed in the *Directory*?” I show people what it is. They’re afraid you’ll ask embarrassing questions like “Do you have a toilet?” and “Can I see it?” I tell them they can list whatever they want — the job, the husband’s name, the wife’s name — simple things that most people don’t mind. Most people like to be noticed, they like being asked.

The supervisor said I have the right manner and appearance: medium size, medium age, dark hair, and glasses. I received a week’s training, and then I was given a territory. The Book is published yearly. I’m paid at the rate of twenty-five cents an entry.

I live in a one-room apartment on Alta Vista, in the old Bunker Hill district, so Bunker Hill is part of my territory. You

have to do a lot of climbing, but I like the feeling of being elsewhere. Apartment houses are convenient for this work, and Bunker Hill has a lot of them. The population is older, and older people don't mind taking a little time since they're not going anywhere. I don't expect to be asked in, and that puts people at ease. It's easy to be listed in the *Directory*, that's my message.

I made the acquaintance of a Mr. John Casaroli. Mr. John, as he was known, was a retired opera singer and teacher. I listed him as *Casaroli, John, vcl tchr, New Grand Hotel 257 Grand Ave.* It turned out we got along, and I was often a guest in his apartment. One evening I arrived there to find police and onlookers crowded around what looked like a body on the sidewalk. The police said Mr. John had jumped from the roof just minutes before and was dead. They asked me if I was an "associate" of his, and I explained that he was my friend and I'd been invited for a spaghetti dinner. They took me to police headquarters and I was questioned for an hour. When I asked why, the officer told me it was routine. That's when I learned that Mr. John had made a will and left his record player and all his records and Italian poetry books to me. I spent the next few evenings moving them to my apartment, one block away. I discovered he owned a copy of the *City Directory*. It had been hollowed out, and inside was five thousand dollars — in hundred-dollar bills! I had never even seen a hundred-dollar bill. I decided to leave the money where it was and go on about my business. I didn't tell anyone, since there was no one to tell. Mr. John was the one friend I had. But I wondered — why would a man, an Italian, make all that spaghetti and then jump off the roof?

Mr. John's treasures made life much more interesting. I started listening to the records in the evenings and drinking the Cribari red wine in the way he used to do, a new experience for me. Then I thought I might try to learn Italian so I could read the poetry books. Why not? There was an Italian woman in

my building I knew only as Cousin Lizzie. She agreed to teach me for fifty cents an hour. I listed her as *Giordano, Lizzie (wid Benito), smstrs, Alta Vista Apts. 255 Bunker Hill Ave.*

We use abbreviations for the jobs: *smstrs* for seamstress; *lab* for laborer; *pntsprsr* for pants presser; *shmtlwrkr* for sheet-metal worker, and so on. Even with the abbreviations, the *Directory* is huge and the lettering is so tiny, some readers have to use a magnifying glass. We're trained to be very particular about the spelling of names. I meet people who are poorly educated and aren't sure how to spell their own names. In that case, I have to ask other family members, or neighbors, or check their mail, if they don't object. I don't mind taking the time; it's all part of the job.

One day, I knocked at the apartment of a Mr. and Mrs. H. D. Clark, and a woman answered. There was some kind of a service going on inside. I heard someone reading from the Bible. The woman picked up a small case off the floor and shoved it at me, shouting, "You can't leave him alone, can you? He's dead, but you bastards can't leave him alone!" She slammed the door. I took the case home and opened it, and it was a clarinet. There was a card pasted inside the lid that read, "If found, please return to Howdy Clark." I looked him up in the *Directory*. He was listed as *Clarke, Howard D. (Margaret), music, New Grand Hotel 257 Grand Ave.* I made a note to relist Margaret Clark as *wid*, the abbreviation for widow, but when I returned the following week to confirm the spelling of Clark, she was gone, *no frwrng*. The old Italian moving man saw me looking at mailboxes. "They move in, they move out," he said.

I heard music. I went up the steps to the front porch, and there a man was playing the ukulele. "No vacancy," he said when he saw me.

"The widow Clark is gone," I said.

"I don't like the cops hanging around."

“I’m not a cop, or a bill collector,” I said. I showed him the book.

“A lousy book that costs twenty-five dollars? Nobody has that kind of money to throw around, but nobody.”

I thought of Mr. John. “You can’t judge a book by the cover,” I said, but he was right in a way. The Book is not really meant for the ordinary home; it’s a service to the business world, that’s the official point of view. I once had the idea of offering it to homeowners on the time payment plan of fifty cents a week, but my supervisor said, “Can’t be done, just do your job.”

I was reassigned to the district near the L.A. River called Aliso Flats, or just The Flats. Many of the local residents are Mexican, and Russians of the Molokan faith. Mexican women are usually at home, and I’m offered a little lunch sometimes — you never know what. Women often make lunches for sale in the home to make extra money. I list those as “lunch rooms.” Some homes have rented rooms so I need to talk to the roomers as well. My first week in the Flats, a housewife showed me to the back where the roomer lived. I knocked, but there was no reply. I said, “Hello, I’m from the *City Directory*, and I would like to ask you a few questions. It only takes five minutes.” I heard a radio playing. I knocked again. I pushed open the screen door and saw a man’s feet. His body was in the kitchen. There was blood on the floor and blood on the walls. The woman screamed and ran back inside the front house. I used the neighbor’s phone to call the police. That’s part of our training. The police asked if I knew the man, if I was an associate of his. I showed my business card like we’re trained to do. They took my name and address and told me not to leave town. I asked the officers if they would like to be listed in the *City Directory*. “Not on duty,” they said, but one officer gave me his home address and suggested I call on him later.

I had difficulty in the Flats after the story got around. I

overheard one Molokan woman, Sadie Tolstoy, telling her friend, "He takes the names to the dark side." Finally, I stopped going down there, but I missed the little chili stand on Utah Street. It was only fifteen cents a bowl and very good.

Thanks to Mr. John, I can eat wherever I want, but I usually make my own lunch. Pershing Square is a perfect place to sit and watch people. There are big shade trees and flowers and religious speakers. One day, I sat across from a woman dressed in black with tangled hair and strange fingernails that had grown out long and curved back. She shook her Bible at me. "False prophet!" she croaked. Another man walked by, and she shook the Bible at him. "Judas!" The man ducked his head down and hurried along the path. "Whore of Babylon!" she shouted to a woman in high heels pushing a baby stroller.

I ate my ham sandwich and made entries in my daybook. A man on the bench next to me said, "What are you writing? Tales of the sordid, the lurid?" I showed him the Book. He was very old and poorly dressed, but you can't judge on appearances. He put out his hand, saying, "Finchley by name, hobo by trade, no permanent address."

"The *Directory* doesn't recognize that occupation," I replied.

"Oh, I've been many things. If you want the whole story, it's going to cost you."

"The *Directory* doesn't pay for information."

"They'll pay. It's a first-rate yarn. Comedy, tragedy, sin — the worst kind! I'll cancel all previous engagements. Just open an account at Gordon's liquor store for the duration." He shuffled off.

I spent the rest of the day in the Japanese district called Little Tokyo. I interviewed three dentists, two lawyers, a doctor, and ten restaurant cooks in one building — all single men. The professional types spoke good English but the cooks thought I was checking white cards, so they clammed up. It took a long

time, and the building was hot and stuffy. There was a bar on the street level called Tokyo Big Shot, a tiny little place with a counter and eight bar stools. It was empty except for the Japanese bartender and a white woman. I ordered Brew 102 — it's cheap and it hits. The bartender poured one and sneered at me. "You a checker?" he asked suspiciously.

"He don't look like a checker," the woman said. She was missing some of her lower front teeth, so it came out like "shecker."

"What a goddamn checker look like?" the bartender said.

"He's got a satchel like they got, but his eyes are bad. He ain't a checker."

"What's a checker?" I asked.

"State liquor board," said the woman. Aside from her teeth and a slight tremor in one hand, she was not so bad looking. I put the Book down on the bar. "This is what I do," I told her. "How'd you like to be listed? It's free."

"A shnooper," she said.

"Told you," said the bartender.

"Aren't there any Japanese women around here?" I asked.

"What's he want 'em for?" the woman said.

The bartender shook his finger at me. "Goddamn checker. You drink up, go home."

The *Directory* doesn't list bars. I paid up and left.

"Won't turn any tricksh for him," the woman called out after me.

The next day, Billy the office boy came looking for me in Pershing Square. "Super wants you," he said in his unfriendly way. I don't like Billy.

"What for?" I asked, just to irritate him. Billy hates questions, hates to give answers.

"Hell do I know," he said.

I put my ham sandwich back in my bag. "And Daniel was

cast in the lion's den," the woman in black said from her bench across the path.

They call it the City Directory Library. I've never seen any of the public there, so it must be a library in name only for business reasons. In point of fact, the supervisor is the only person there, in my experience. You address him as Sir or Mr. Supervisor. I don't even know his name.

"Got a call about you from a Sergeant Spangler at police headquarters." The supervisor has a way of talking to you without looking up from his desk. "Two dead men, so they wonder why."

"Three, if we count Howdy Clark the clarinet player."

"Unreported?"

"He was in his apartment, in his coffin. I spoke to Mrs. Clark, but she declined to be listed." That was the wrong thing to say. The supervisor blew up.

"I don't *give* a damn about any woman named Clark, you just forget all about *that*. I'll tell you *this*, and I want you to understand *this*. No dead bodies. Any more of that and you are *out*," he shouted, stabbing the desk with his finger.

"But it's bound to happen, look at the numbers," I said.

"You listen to *me*. Don't contradict *me*. I'm reassigning you to beauty parlors, as of *right now*. Get moving."

"You heard him," Billy said as I was leaving.

Sounds easy, doesn't it? But you have to go out and find them, and that can take up all your time. I have what you might call "hound-dog reckoning" — a nose for where to look — and it comes in handy. I started with Beauty by Rene, next door to a fancy dress shop. I walked in and the smell hit me. I was unprepared for that! And the noise — hair dryers going, women talking in loud voices a mile a minute like crows in a tree. I spoke to the first operator. "Your business could be listed in the *City Directory*." She kept right on yammering to the woman in the chair. I moved on. I held the Book open for the next one. "Beauty by Rene, bold type, no extra charge," I said cheerfully.

“Boss!” she yelled.

“Where is he?” I yelled back.

“She! In the back!” A very thin woman was sitting at a tiny desk talking into a telephone. She slammed the receiver down and stared at me and said, “Well, what?”

I held the Book open. “This is a wonderful opportunity to list with the *City Directory* at no cost to you, the businessman.”

“Don’t hand me that,” she said. “I run this place. Everyone out there is a mad dog from hell until proven otherwise, including you and that son of a bitch landlord on the telephone.” She lit a cigarette and blew smoke at me. “Trying to break my balls, can you believe the son of a bitch?”

“Why not give the Book a try for a year?”

“All right, hotshot, what’s your name?”

“Frank.”

“As in what?”

“Frank St. Claire.”

“Nice. So lead off with it. Don’t start with the ‘no charge’ bit, make it sound good, give it a little class, dress it up for crissakes.” She filled out the form. “What made you come in here?”

“That’s my assignment, beauty shops.”

“There’s too damn many. It’s a cutthroat business, it’s very competitive. Do me a favor and don’t list all of ’em right around this neck of the woods. Make me look good. The Biltmore, that’s a ritzy crowd, they got sheckles in their pants.” I told her thanks, I’d do my best. I left, but then I went back.

“Let me ask you something,” I said.

“Fire away, Frankie.”

“How long can fingernails grow if you don’t cut them?”

“Who knows? They keep growing, like hair. It’s molecular.”

“Thanks.”

“Why?”

“I see this woman in Pershing Square every day where I eat lunch. Her nails are about a foot long, but curved back around.”

“Tell her to drop in for a manicure, I’ll give her the professional discount.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re a very thankful guy, Frankie. Go get yourself a new pair of glasses.”

I walked back to Pershing Square. The woman in black was gone. It was getting on toward evening, and I closed my eyes and fell asleep. When I woke up, she was back. “Precept upon precept, line upon line, here a little, there a little.” She seemed to be in a relaxed frame of mind. “Of money, some have coveted. They have erred from the faith and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.” I waited, hoping to hear more. I tried to give her a quarter, but she hid her face behind the Bible and wouldn’t look at me. I left.

There’s a bar at the top of Grand Avenue called the Los Amigos. They have a coin-operated player piano, a shuffleboard table game, and booths along the side. The bartender’s name is Russell. It was late, and the place was quiet. Russell saw me come in.

“Hiya, Frank. Haven’t seen you around lately. The usual?”

“No. I want a whiskey sour. That’s a good drink, right?”

“Sure, Frank, sure. One whiskey sour.” There was a woman alone in a booth, and she looked up when she heard my voice. It was the manager from Beauty by Rene.

“Thankful Frankie,” she said. I sat down across from her.

“How are you this evening, Rene? I guess I’m surprised to see you in my neighborhood.”

“Don’t be.”

“How’s it going with the landlord?” I asked, just trying to be delicate.

“That ball-busting son of a bitch? I can’t move now, things are just starting to pick up. Downtown’s gonna take off when the war hits.”

“War?” I wasn’t sure what she was talking about or how many drinks she’d had.

“War, kiddo. As in Adolf H.? You heard about him?”

“I’m not sure. I haven’t seen the papers lately. Where is the war?”

“Get lost. Nobody’s that out to lunch, but nobody. You better get your nose out of that book. Get yourself a girl, there’s one on every corner.”

I was starting to pick up a slight drawl in her talk. “Where are you from, originally?” In Los Angeles, it’s a harmless question.

“Amarillo, Texas. I caught the first thing smokin’. End of story.”

“How’d you get started in the beauty line?” I asked.

“I was a bartender in Amarillo. The L.A. cops won’t let a woman tend bar in their precious town. I went to cosmetology school, I’m legal.”

Russell brought fresh drinks. “This whiskey sour is not bad,” I said.

“Look, I can’t figure you out. I mean, you’re all right, aren’t you? Upstairs?” She pointed to her head and made a circle with her finger. “It’s no act — the book and your job and all that?”

“It’s no act. I work very hard. My boss is a bastard, like your landlord. I’ll tell you a little story if you want to hear it.”

“Fire away, Frankie. Fire away and fall back.”

“I had one friend here on the Hill. Mr. John, an Italian opera singer. But he doesn’t sing anymore, and you want to know why? Because he’s dead, that’s why. He jumped off the roof of the New Grand Hotel.”

“A jumper.”

“You come back to my place and I’ll show you something you never seen in a month of Sundays. I can’t believe it myself.”

“I got to get down the Hill before the train stops. Tomorrow is another day to be beautiful, right, Frankie boy?”

“You don’t believe me. You think I’m one of those mad dogs, like you said.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Whiskey sour is a damn good drink.” She got up and left, just like that.

Russell walked by, checking tables for tips. “Can’t win ’em all!” he said, clapping me on the back so hard I almost choked. I thought about leaving, but then Louie Castro walked up. Louie is a very fat, oily man with a fat, oily voice. Not the kind of man you’d care to know too well. He owns the Los Amigos and lives upstairs.

“Nice to see you, Frank. Always nice to see an old friend.” He slid into the booth. “Of course I heard about Mr. John. Tragic.” I nodded, like I was too sad to say anything. “I understand you came into a nice little bequest. That’s the kind of man he was, generous to his friends.” Louie makes it his business to know about things; he likes to know the value of people and things. He sat there, looking at me, sizing me up.

I had to say something. “That’s right. Records and books, Italian stuff. I don’t understand Italian.” Basically true.

“Sentimental, that’s the kind of man Mr. John was. And I’m very emotional, Frank. That’s why I’m so upset about Mr. John.” Louie waited for a reply, but I couldn’t think of anything emotional, so I kept quiet. “I’m glad we had this little talk,” he said. He maneuvered his big body out of the booth and went upstairs. Russell fussed around for a while. “Gotta close, pal. See you real soon!” I left.

Down below, the city sparkled and hummed like a giant beehive. I walked home. My apartment building is the oldest wooden structure on Bunker Hill. Each floor has a covered porch across the front, and the rooms open out onto it. At night, you can see the lights of the city stretching away to the east. The river, the train tracks, the gasworks, Lincoln Heights, El Sereno, and beyond. I like living there, even though the showers are downstairs. When I got back I checked the directory to make

sure the money was all there. I listened to some opera records and looked at the poetry books. I hadn't been doing so well with my lessons. I knew some of the words but I didn't understand the poems. "Try harder," Cousin Lizzie kept saying.

Next morning I went out to buy a paper from Lou Lubin, the gray-haired newsboy who hangs out by the Angel's Flight platform. "Lo, Lou." I said. I always use that line with him. "What's this I hear about war?"

"Where you been, in the jug?" He's short, and he cocks his head to the side, looking up.

"I'm a working man, Lou, I don't have time to know all these things. Fill me in."

"Hitler and Mussolini got it all sewn up tight. I haven't heard from the family in two years, don't know where they're at. It's all sewn up tighter'n Aunt Fannie's girdle." Lou used to be a nightclub dancer and an extra in the movies.

"Sorry to hear it, Lou. I hope they're okay."

"Thanks."

"You know anything about Mr. John?"

Lou turned so that his back was to the street. "Some guys were talking to him. Very tough guys in a Cadillac. A Cadillac sticks out."

"What'd they want?"

"I'm just the newsy on the street here. Gotta keep the nose clean. You were a friend of his. It was something they thought he had. Something small, something he had hidden in his place. They didn't find it, and they went away. Then they came back."

"The police said it was suicide."

"The Catholics would be out of business."

"Where would a man go for clarinet lessons?"

"Look it up."

Lou was getting nervous, he wanted me to leave. I looked up "Music Teachers." It was mostly women teaching in the

home. Mostly piano and violin. I came across *The Saxophone Shop, Leo Schenck, 319 Spring St. R1121*. I called the number from a pay phone. He sounded like an older man.

"This is Leo."

"Do you teach clarinet?"

"Age?"

"Thirty-eight."

"Too old."

"I'd like to try."

"Why?"

"I was given a clarinet."

"Bring it in." Leo sounded tired, and it was only eleven in the morning. I walked there. It was Saturday and the downtown streets were crowded with shoppers. Every restaurant had a line of people waiting to eat, but I had a salami sandwich in my pocket. The shop on Spring Street was tiny and dark, with saxophones hanging up and saxophone parts lying all around. Leo was a skinny bald man with horn-rim glasses and a green visor like pawnbrokers wear. He opened the clarinet case and stood there looking at it. Inside the case, the clarinet was broken down into four sections. You could see it was old, but it had been well cared for. Leo looked at me through his thick glasses.

"I don't want to know how you got this," he said. "I don't want to know about you or who sent you." He closed the lid and snapped the latches. "I got a sawed-off. I made it myself. You try anything, I'm taking you with me."

"I represent the *City Directory*. No other medium can —"

"I got double-ought buck here. They'll just turn the hose on you and wash you into the street." He brought it up from under the counter and showed it to me, the meanest looking little thing I ever saw. I took the case and left. I started walking fast down Spring Street. I walked right through every red light and didn't stop until I got to my bench in Pershing Square.

I tried to calm down. People were coming and going all

around me: kids, old folks, men and women, laughing and talking, friends meeting and calling out to each other. I was too scared to move. After a while, I opened up the case and looked at the four sections of the clarinet as Leo had done. I took the pieces out and turned them around in my hands, but it meant nothing. It was just one more thing I didn't understand.

"You don't look like a reed man," said a voice next me. I jumped, but it was only Finchley, the retired hobo. He took the case and began assembling the pieces like he knew all about it. "Le Blanc, very nice. Something's stuck in here." He fingered around inside one of the sections and brought out a rolled-up piece of paper. "There's your problem," he said, handing it to me. There was a little box in the case and thin pieces of wood inside the box. He took one out and moistened it with his tongue; then he fitted the wood into the end of the clarinet and put the end in his mouth and began to play a little tune. I recognized it. "Over the Waves," which everyone has heard at some point. The woman in black appeared. She came out from behind a palm tree holding her arms straight out to the side and twirling around with the music. She had her Bible in one hand, but she seemed to have forgotten about it. People passing by stopped to watch her. She was a sight, with her torn black dress and her matted hair and those fingernails! After a while, Finchley stopped playing and tipped his hat. "Thank you, friends and neighbors, you're very kind, I'm sure." He passed it around. Some people put money in the hat, others walked off. The woman sat down on her bench across the path and seemed to go right to sleep. "We did good business," Finchley said. "Let us repair to a nice, cool bar. Should we ask your friend?" I shook my head. "She'll be fine," I said "I need a drink bad."

The nice, cool bar turned out to be the Tokyo Big Shot.

"Finchley!" said the Japanese bartender. His gold teeth lit up.

"And the shecker," said the snaggletooth woman at the end of the bar.

“My friend is in a quandary, at a crossroads, and we have come here today to find resolution. For this purpose, we require your back table and a bottle of your cheapest whiskey, *tout suite*,” Finchley said. The woman grabbed her glass and made a beeline for the curtain behind the bar, but Finchley said, “You’d best remain on watch, my dear. Be on the lookout for a midget carrying an umbrella.”

Behind the curtain was a tiny room with a round table and four chairs. There was nothing else in the room except a telephone and a Mexican pinup calendar from 1936. A lightbulb hung from a nail in the ceiling. The bartender brought a bottle and two glasses. “That will be all, Sammy. We’ll call if we need you.” Sammy laughed and went back out front.

“A man conceals something inside a clarinet. He assumes it will be found by someone in particular, someone who will understand.” Finchley unrolled the paper and smoothed it out on the table. It was a photograph of three men, taken at a restaurant table. The men were looking straight at the camera. Their faces were flat and bright, like a flashbulb had been used. The picture was old, and the men were wearing clothes from another time.

I recognized one man. “It’s Mr. John,” I said. “He was my friend, up on the Hill. He’s dead now. But this is him, a long time ago. I know it’s him.”

“You have the clarinet, and you know this man.”

“But I don’t know why I have it,” I said. I explained how the widow Clark mistook me for someone else.

“But you might have been the right man. She was expecting somebody. She blamed them.” I told Finchley about Leo and the shotgun. “We’ll get to that presently,” he said.

“But what if they’re looking for me now?” I said. “Leo was scared. I’m scared.”

“That’s good. Danger sharpens up the mind.” The woman came in through the curtain. “The midget was asking for you. I shaid you’d been here and gone,” she said.

"That's fine, Lydia. Have a drink."

"Well, I don't mind if I do." She held out her glass. Finchley poured her a tall one, and she tossed it down in one gulp.

"Shammysh rotgut is the worsht shince canned heat," she said.

"Have one more," said Finchley. She took her drink in both hands and went out through the curtain.

"What's that about a midget?" I asked.

"Just a fellow I know. Trouble follows him, he's like a human lightning rod. A sure sign that something's up." Finchley rubbed his hands with enthusiasm.

I was beginning to form an opinion of Finchley. Had I fallen in with a madman? I kept hearing Leo, "They'll wash you into the street." It wasn't hard to imagine: The gutter on Spring Street. Sewer pipes. Garbage in the riverbed down by Aliso Flats. "What about the dead man on Utah Street?" I said.

"Omit nothing," said Finchley. I tried to remember details. The blood caught his attention. "Blood on the walls, delightful! Sprayed, smeared, how was it done? Think, man, think!"

"Smeared, I would say. I didn't stick around there, I had to find a telephone."

"Smeared how? Up high? Down low?"

"Low, definitely. It looked a little like letters. Maybe it meant something."

"Close your eyes. What do you see? You knock. You open the screen door. You look about for someone in the house. Something makes you look down. Is something moving?"

"No, it's just feet."

"Do you smell anything?"

"Frying lard."

"Music?"

"A radio. A soap opera. *Ma Perkins*?"

"Excellent. Eleven o'clock to eleven fifteen, followed by *Our Gal Sunday*. You get the idea?"

“No, I don’t.”

“My friend, consider. A man is listening to the radio while making lunch, sometime between eleven and eleven fifteen. But by the time you arrive, he’s been murdered, his blood smeared on the wall down by the floor. I suggest he named the killer with his own blood, then crawled into the kitchen and died. What did the blood spell?”

Then I saw it. “It spelled ‘Book.’” Finchley picked up the telephone and dialed.

“Homicide,” he said into the receiver. He waited. Then he said, “They’re putting me through.”

After what seemed like days and days, a big man in a suit came into the room and sat down at the desk. I was handcuffed to a chair. He shuffled some papers around and looked over at me.

“So, Mr. St. Claire. Frank St. Claire. I wouldn’t be here, wouldn’t waste my time, but there’s too many connections.”

My mouth was dry and my tongue felt like an ironing board, but I had to say something. “What do you mean, connections?”

“A suicide on Bunker Hill, a dead musician in hock to the bookies, and a spic dismemberment down in the Flats. And Frank St. Claire knew them all.”

“I meet people in my job, I don’t know them. Except for Mr. John.”

“John Casaroli jumps off the roof and you inherit. Why? Tell me that. Make it sound good.”

“I really don’t know.”

“A couple of bright boys were seen hanging around there. Friends of yours?”

“I don’t have any friends since Mr. John died.”

“You create a disturbance at the Clark home while a service is going on. No respect for the dead, it seems. Why’s that?”

“I was doing my job, how could I know?”

"The widow says you told her to hand over the clarinet. Says you threatened her."

"She's lying. She gave it to me."

"Why would she lie?"

"I don't know."

"All right, Utah Street. Some character slices this guy's arm off and beats him with it. There's blood on the walls. Maybe it spells 'book,' maybe he was overdue at the library, I wouldn't know. But, here's Frank St. Claire at the scene, within minutes, and that's just one too many times in my book."

"The supervisor makes all the decisions. I think he was punishing me for the trouble with Howdy Clark. Nobody wants to work the Flats."

The detective got up. "Nobody's as dumb as you act," he said. He left the room. After a while, an officer in uniform came and took me down the hall to another room. A man in a white coat was seated behind a desk. He told me to sit down and relax. Relax! How could I?

"I'm Dr. Sonderborg," the man said. "I'm going to ask you some questions."

"I've done nothing," I said.

"Begin, if you will, by telling me about yourself. Anything that comes to mind."

"Nothing comes to mind."

"I see you're a single man, living alone. Do you have a girlfriend?"

"I know a girl. I know three girls altogether, but I recently met one in particular."

"Tell me about her. What's her name?"

"Rene. She runs a beauty parlor on Olive and Fifth."

"Is she kind to you, is she affectionate? Responsive?"

"She says I might be a mad dog from hell. 'The jury's out,' is how she puts it."

“And that makes you angry.”

“No.”

“Would you say her behavior towards you is cruel?
Belittling?”

“Oh, no. She’s really a nice person.”

“Do you ever ask her to hurt you, to punish you?”

“What? What is this, who are you?” Maybe the police are
crazy, I thought.

“Do you hate the police?”

“No.”

“Are you plotting against the government of the United
States?”

“No.”

“Are you a Communist?”

“What’s that?” I said. The doctor pushed a button on the
desk and the detective came in the room.

“What do we got?” he asked.

“Why do you waste my time? Get him out of my office.
Drop him off in Griffith Park. I went to medical school for eight
years, Spangler. Eight goddamn years.”

“And you got a *very tough* job here, Sonderborg,” Spangler
said with obvious distaste.

Detective Spangler gave me back my briefcase and told me
not to leave town. I left the police building and walked up the
Hill. The police believe everything is a pattern. Once they see a
pattern, they think they know it all, and they think they got you.
That’s not the way life is. Take it from me, life is random and
inscrutable, like the *City Directory*. Or my name isn’t *St. Claire*,
Frank, chkr, Alta Vista Apts 255 Alta Vista Ave., Ls Angls.