

THE LARGE TORPOR

by

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<1977>

It was one of those ugly, hot, stinking, filthy, Southern California nights that are so ugly, hot, stinking and filthy. The Mexicanos have a word for it. They call it "noche".

I'd just left my puce Mercury coupe parked in front of a crummy little Greek dive called Meno's, on the corner of Pineapple and Kowabonga. I was hungry. I guess it was seeing that fish hawk perched expectantly on an open fire hydrant that put me in the mood for seafood. Anyway, I took a stroll over to the Kit Kat Funeral Parlor, walked through the chapel where a cheap little blonde number in a bikini was watering the plastic flowers, down the back steps, and into the speak-easy in the cellar.

There was organ music coming from the bandstand, but nobody seemed to want to dance, so I made for an empty table behind a large hairnet that had been draped over the back wall. I thought I recognized one of the waiters from an industrial documentary I had seen in the fourth grade. If he knew me, he didn't let on. I decided I'd better play it safe. "Hey, waiter!"

"Yeh?"

When I heard that voice, I knew the movie must have been dubbed. I wanted to know why. "Do you serve shrimps?"

He smiled, and I saw that he was wearing braces. Maybe it was his turn to be in the fourth grade. "Sure, we serve anybody, Gumshoe. Sit down." Then he disappeared into the kitchen.

I looked around. It was a nice enough little place, if you don't mind religious music with your liquor.

Then this dame came over, the kind with a wide, cool, go-to-hell mouth and very kissable lips. She stuck her nose right up against the net. "Haven't I seen your face somewhere else?"

"Uh-uh, honey. It's been here all the time." It was time to make a move. "Wanna dance?"

"Sure, Gumshoe."

We moved out into the center, but after a while she started making for the edge. Maybe she didn't like the spotlights in her eyes. Maybe she just preferred roller-skating. I never got to find out because the music stopped. She looked relieved. "You sure live up to your name, Gumshoe. You dance so bad that a chimpanzee would have trouble following you."

I was still thinking about that one when the music started up again. "Come on," I said. "Let's dance some more. This one's nice and slow."

"No!" And she looked like she meant it. "Your feet are killing me. Anyway, I'm thirsty. Buy me a drink instead, Gumshoe."

"Okay." And we went over to the bar. "Hey, bartender!" As I saw the guy start to come toward us, I turned to her. "What do you like?"

She looked surprised, as if nobody had asked her a question like that in a long time. Then she looked right at me and whispered softly, "Bourbon's okay."

"Yeh." I knew what she meant. The bartender was beginning to look a little edgy, like he wanted to move on, so I didn't keep him in the dark. "Two Brown Bombers." He looked us over for what seemed like a second, and then turned and walked away.

This amused the kid, and she laughed, a deep throaty laugh that really made you wonder. "What's that?" she asked.

"What's what, sugar-face?" I didn't know what she meant.

"A Brown Bomber, of course." She did an encore on the laugh.

"Oh. Hot coca-cola."

She stopped laughing real fast. "Wow! You're a real cheapo, Gumshoe. A real cheapo."

In a few minutes, the bartender was back with two glasses and a small saucepan. "Two bits, mister," he averred. I didn't have that much on me so she ended up having to pay.

As we carried our drinks back to the table and sat down, I asked her, "What's your name, kid?"

She took out a cigarette and had some trouble lighting it before she answered. "Rooney...LaGoon Rooney."

"Nice name, nice face, even nicer...." Something made me stop. Call it an intuition. "Look, are you in some kind of trouble?"

She went cold on me. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Look, sister, get one thing straight. I don't ask questions. So if you have something to spill, spill it."

She looked at her drink for a moment. "Okay, Gumshoe, you win. I need your help, and I'm willing to pay for it. Here's fifteen G's." She reached into her eelskin purse and pulled out a string of G's, just like she promised.

I stuffed them in my pocket, figuring I could use them to monogram my underwear, or something. "Thanks."

BAH-BAH-BAHM! It sounded like a trombone, but the way LaGoon reacted, you'd have thought it was the last trumpet. It was kind of loud. BAH-BAH-BAH-BAH-BAHM! I thought of reaching for my rod and giving that musician a lead mute, but my aim isn't too hot. LaGoon was shaking bad. "What is it?" I asked.

"That goddam music. It startled me. It's like a goddam movie. Let's get out of here."

I wondered what other dirty words she knew. "I'll take you home," I said.

"No! I don't have any place to go." She was still shaking.

"Then let's go to my place." I took her arm, and the rest of her followed.

We drove over to my apartment. She acted a little jumpy going up the stairs, like she was having second thoughts, but once we got inside, she calmed down. I was a little unsure about the best way to handle her, but the situation never got out of hand because I laid it right on the line at the start. "If you stay here tonight, you'll have to make your own bed."

"Sure. Anything you say."

I walked over to the closet and opened the door. "Fine. Here's a hammer and saw. Good night."

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I woke up the next morning to find the apartment empty, except for me and a large pile of sawdust in the corner near the window. The dame with the dynamite smile was gone, and so was LaGoon Rooney. I decided not to try to get a hold of her again until I found out a little more about this case.

In the bathroom under the shaving mirror I found an old matchbook I had lifted last Easter from Lousy Louie, a hophead crook who runs numbers down in the La Bimbo Valley. There was an address scribbled on the back with lipstick. I decided to forget shaving. I climbed into my coupe, and headed south toward San Scritano.

It was what they call a nice cool day in Southern California. From time to time a breathless bird would stagger through the motionless, hot and scented air. When I got to the address on the matchbook, I drove past and parked around the corner. Then I walked back along a wide sidewalk to a row of greased palm trees that fronted the Aksarben residence.

It was one of those baroque stucco affairs. A little boy stood holding a butterfly net on the fine green lawn in front of the house. Occasionally, he waved it at a butterfly that fluttered heavily around the hydrangea bush. I rang the doorbell and waited. Next to me there was a small painted flamingo, in white riding breeches and a green jacket. On its head was a red cap. It was holding a whip, and there was an iron hitching-ring in the block at its feet. It looked a little sad, as if it had been standing there a long time and was getting discouraged. I patted its head while I waited for somebody to come to the door. After a few more minutes I turned to the little kid. "Hey, buster, is your mother home?"

"Y-y-yessir."

I rang again, but no one answered the door. I turned to face the kid a second time. "I thought you said your mother was home."

"She is. But we don't live here."

Some cases are tougher to crack than a squirrel's nuts, especially when you don't get the breaks. And this was beginning to look like one of those cases; but just then I saw a tall man in a long black coat come out of the house next door and get into a sleek, ebony limousine with North Dakota plates, and drive off. As the car turned the corner, I noticed that it had square tires.

A glance at the driver told me it was Scottie "Fat Boy" Liddell out of Pittsburgh. That clinched it. The big doodah in the back seat could only be Apthorp Pressforth Clapper III, the richest man in all of Dingalingo County, and the brains behind the Wichita Diploma Caper, though nobody could prove it.

I didn't waste any time finding out who had been entertaining Apthorp Clapper. The name on the door read "Thelma Phantod, Queen of Antartica", until I broke it down. I caught sight of Thelma right away, moving around nervously in the center of the living room, with a plaid suitcase over her head. The room was filled with hundreds of pairs of bedroom slippers, of every shape, size, color, and creed.

I grabbed the handle of the suitcase and pulled. It got her attention. "Hey, luggage-head, are you Thelma Phantod?"

Her voice came back at me really weak, like the suitcase was packed full. "Wha?"

I snapped open the locks with my thumbs, and pulled the thing off her head. "Going somewhere, Thelma?"

"I don't know you."

"You are Thelma Phantod?"

"Suppose I am, Gumshoe."

"I've gotta be sure. Can you identify yourself?"

She turned her head, and threw a quick glance at the svelte reflection in the stainless-steel drapes. "Yeh, it's me all right."

"Okay. I want some information, Thelma, and I want it fast."

"Get lost, big boy! I ain't answerin' no questions, not for you or nobody. I'm bushed. I just flew in from Reno."

"I bet your arms are tired."

"Buzz off, tough stuff! I have to unpack my drawers."

"Need some help?"

"Tell me, Gumshoe, how do you manage to say so many stupid things in one day?"

"I get up early every morning."

While I was keeping Thelma busy with this ping pong conversation, I was giving the room the once-over for a second time. "You sure like bedroom slippers, Thelma. Or is your boyfriend a millipede?" She started to answer, but I didn't let up. "What do you know about Apthorp Pressforth Clapper III?"

"Apthorp Pressforth Clapper III, the richest man in all of Dingalingo County, the incredibly wealthy West Coast whore-shoe (sic) magnate, and the brains behind the Wichita Diploma Caper, though nobody but me could prove it? Never heard of him."

"Then who was that bozo in the long black coat I saw come out of here before?"

"Uh...that was my brother...I mean, my father...my brother!" She was hysterical. "My mother! My uncle! My dentist! My sister!"

I slapped her hard. "Stop it, Thelma." By the way she had said "dentist" I could tell she was lying through her teeth. She started to make for the suitcase again, head first. "Cut the ostrich act, Thelma. It ain't gonna work with me."

"It's no act, Gumshoe." She turned around and I could see that she was right. "Where I come from, it's strictly nix on dicks. So even a girl learns to pack a rod." She waved the thing at me. "Now get your tail out of here and don't come back, unless you want some .70 caliber buttons sewn on that fancy vest of yours."

She looked like she meant business, so I started for the front door. Thelma was right behind me. "You're a cold-blooded fish, Thelma, but you're in hot water up to your neck, whether you like it or not."

"Hey, lady." It was the little kid from outside, his butterfly net resting on the ledge of the open window behind Thelma. "Hey, lady."

"What do you want, buster? You shouldn't be...." As Thelma started to look over her shoulder, panic raced into her eyes. "No, Sonny, no...." The handle of the butterfly net exploded towards Thelma with a blast that sent her flying backwards. There was a terrible crash, and then nothing.

It must have been a reflex because I don't remember grabbing the gun from Thelma, but I must have because I pumped that little punk full of hard lead candy. As I turned, I saw Thelma lying crumpled in the steel drapes, only they weren't stainless anymore.

It hit me hard. I saw the whiskey, and helped myself. Room service had checked out. The way I figured it, they had let Thelma have it before she could give me the low-down on Clapper, the incredibly wealthy West Coast dingaling, and the brains behind the whore-shoe magnate, though nobody but Thelma could prove it. And now she was dead.

I went around back and took a closer look at the little corpse that lay slumped over the handlebars of the now red tricycle. It was no other than Little Sonny "Caesar" Salada, the youngest torpedo in Detroit or Chicago. But not any more. He was dead, too, like Thelma.

Sirens started singing. Somebody must have called the cops. I had to beat it out of there, and fast.

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I needed time to think. I had to figure this case out, put the pieces of this crooked jigsaw puzzle together before somebody pulled a fast one and swept everything under the carpet, throwing the key away. I went for a long, long walk around the block.

Why had they given it to Thelma? Was it really to keep the lid on the East Kansas Shingle Heist, the brains behind which belonged to Apthorp Pressforth Clapper III, the etc. etc.? Or was it because a certain party had gone off his noodle in the wake of the Salt Lake City pasta murders? And what were five hundred pairs of bedroom slippers doing in the living room? How did someone as badly educated as Thelma ever get to be Queen of Antarctica? I had to think.

Where exactly did LaGoon Rooney figure in all this? And how did she come by those fifteen G's? Where had she learned to saw? Was it her lipstick on the matchbook, or Lousy Louie's? What's the

capital of Nepal? How many chemical elements are there? There were too many questions I didn't have answers to. I decided I needed a drink.

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I drove over to the O'Shaughnessy Plumbing and Heating Supply Company, a plush night club and gambling joint near Laputa and Vine. Through the steam I could make out the bartender. It was Claude Dingle, an ex-elevator-inspector from Muscatine, Iowa. I walked over to the bar. "Let me have a hot coca-cola on the rocks."

"Hot coca-cola on the rocks." He was reaching for a highball glass when - presto - his hand developed the shakes. He turned and looked at me like his dinner had suddenly decided to buy a return ticket. "Did you say hot...hey! it's Gumshoe! I shoulda known. How the hell are ya?"

"Hi, Claude. Long time no see, but I guess you recognized me."

He laughed through his nose. It sounded awful. "Sure, sure I recognized you. Nobody else drinks that horse-piss except you. So what are you doin' with yourself these days?"

"Nothing, I'm on a case."

He dropped the olive he was putting in my drink on the floor. "Oh yeh, Gumshoe? What kinda case?"

"A big one, Claude. One of the biggest."

"No kiddin'." The telephone started to ring but when Claude picked up the receiver, it stopped. I called him back over.

"Listen, Claude. You hear anything I might be interested in, and you let me know, there's fifty cents in it for you."

"Fifty cents? You're sure the cheapo de la cheapo, Gumshoe."

"The offer still stands. Well, I'll be seeing you." I'd gotten what I was after, and without tipping either my hand or Claude. As I climbed off the barstool, I felt wet fingers close around my arm.

"Look, Gumshoe, let me give you a piece of advice on the house, gratis." He looked around to make sure nobody else was listening. "This next act, stick around for it."

"Oh yeh? Hot stuff?"

"The hottest, baby. Mary Belle Frankenstein, the female crooner."

I was definitely interested. The lights dimmed down, and a blonde tomato swayed into the spotlight holding a microphone shaped like a banana. As soft sounds poured out of the white porcelain piano, the whole place became enveloped in a classy exotic magic.

TODAY WILL BE YESTERDAY TOMORROW,
AND TOMORROW, AND TOMORROW.
CREEPS IN THIS PETTY PLACE FROM DAY TO DAY,
DAY TO DAY, TODAY, TOMORROW.

Mary Belle Frankenstein. It had to be an alias. Nobody in Hollywood has a name like "Mary Belle". But with a velvet-and-cream voice like hers, I didn't care.

AND ALL OUR YESTERDAYS WERE ONCE TODAYS,
AND OUR TODAYS ONCE TOMORROWS,
BUT ALL OUR TOMORROWS ARE STILL TOMORROWS,
UNTIL TOMORROW WHEN ONE OF THEM BECOMES TODAY.

The music took on a new, more urgent rhythm, and the figure in the spotlight answered its beat by tearing the lamé-satin tunic from her quivering body. As I put my glasses on for a better view, I ...it was LaGoon! And she was wearing enough clothes to hide behind a toothpick.

THIS MORNING, THIS AFTERNOON, THIS EVENING
ARE TODAY, BUT NOT TOMORROW.
OUR YESTERDAYS HAVE LIGHTED FOOLS THE WAY TO DUSTY DEATH.
OUT, OUT, TODAY! IN, IN, TOMORROW!

It was the story of her life, and she was singing it for me. Even though she was looking the other way, I felt she was singing to me.

A TALE TOLD BY AN IDIOT, TODAY,
RETOLD TONIGHT, PERHAPS TOMORROW.
SOUND AND FURY SIGNIFYING NOTHING,
NOT A GODDAM FUCKING THING.

If there was any applause, she wasn't listening. We were both still lost in the significance of what she had just sung.

She slowly recovered herself, and sidled over to the bar. "Hey, Claude. Gimme a whiskey, straight up."

"Sure thing, Mary Belle."

I caught Dingle's eye as he was reaching for a bottle. "Make that two Brown Bombers straight down instead, on me."

LaGoon turned. Her eyes were wide as pigeon eggs. I looked deep into those eyes, and found there the words to express what I felt.

"Hi, LaGoon."

"Hi...Gumshoe." Why had she hesitated?

"Nice song."

She looked away. "How did you find me?"

"I always try to keep in touch with my clients. Does it matter how?"

She started to move away. I followed her. She stopped. "I don't know. I guess not. Who cares?" In that moment all the sadness of the song came back. She tried to smile. "How's tricks, Gumshoe?"

"Baby, since I met you I can't eat, I can't sleep, I can't drink."

"How come?"

"I'm broke."

She laughed. "Same old Gumshoe. But what happened to the fifteen G's?"

"They fell into a bowl of alphabet soup and got lost."

Suddenly she seemed excited. "What do you mean? What did you find out?"

"Oh, look. Here's our drinks. To us, kid."

She smiled, but I could tell by the way she stabbed repeatedly at the pearl onion at the bottom of her glass that she was after something else.

So was I, really, so I asked her, "Does A. Clapper ring any bells?"

"Not around here."

I wanted to believe her. Maybe we were finally getting somewhere.

It was then that she looked up. "Wait a minute. You don't by any chance mean Mister Aphorp Pressforth Clapper III, the richest man in all of Dingalingo County, the incredibly wealthy West Coast bedroom-slipper-cartel king, the intelligence behind the Wichita Diploma Caper, but not the Salt Lake City pasta murders, as some falsely believe, do you?"

It hit me hard. "Yes, I do."

"Well, I never heard of him!" Almost exactly what Thelma had said, and she was dead. Or was she?

"You expect me to believe you?"

"You're being paid to believe me. I hired you, remember? Now tell me who this guy is." She wanted to know how much I had found out.

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

The starch went out of her, and she started to cry. "Why?" She took my hand tenderly, and pressed it. "Why, Gumshoe? Level with me."

"Because it's our policy never to reveal anything to our clients." I was about to explain that it was nothing personal when a gun went off close by. A woman screamed, then a man screamed, and after that things started to happen too fast.

Somebody punched me in the nose. It felt like LaGoon, but out of the corner of my eye I could see Claude Dingle dancing out of the place like a top in a hurry. As I tried to stand up, I became conscious of a dull pain in my right temple. Had I been shot? The walls began to move around like cards being shuffled; and as I reached for my drink, I felt myself falling. The next thing I knew I was on the floor.

As the darkness closed in, like turtles gathering on the beach, I suddenly saw where I had gone wrong. The clue was in something LaGoon had said. The...

Oof! I felt something flat pushing down hard into my gut. Something else, black and pointed, was coming towards my head, blocking out the light that wanted to pour in. Fat people were stomping me.

But the clue...I had to find it and hold on to it, no matter what....Thelma had lied, I could see that now, even with a shoe in my face...LaGoon had lied, too, and that hurt....I could feel the bitter taste of the congealed caramel stick in my throat as the nausea pulled me down into its flotsam whirlpool. As I sank deeper and deeper, I caught sight of a last piece of the puzzle trying to float to the surface....I had it...everyone was lying, even Claude...there are no elevators in Muscatine...

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Bridgeport