

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/4

Don MacLaren

USN, San Diego, 1979

I joined the Navy in 1978 after trying to get a job on a merchant ship, the railroad, or one of the auto plants in my hometown of Grand Rapids, Michigan and failing at all three attempts. I had to join a union to work at those jobs and the unions weren't accepting new members.

I worked (at a non-union job) at a cardboard factory for a little over a year in Grand Rapids and hated it. My girlfriend from high school had disappeared from my life, I didn't have money for college, and I wanted to get the hell out of Grand Rapids, which was a cultural wasteland to me. The military seemed to be the only alternative. A marine recruiter called me one day and scheduled an appointment for an interview. The next day I walked in to the recruiting station but he wasn't there. So I talked with the Navy recruiters who were sitting at the other side of the office. Not long after that I started boot camp at Great Lakes, Illinois, near Chicago, just before Thanksgiving. Then, in January, 1979 I started Radioman school in San Diego. I was 19.

*

In Radioman school we sat in individual, partitioned booths and read from textbooks, then took short tests as we progressed through the textbooks. For the most part, the texts – full of information on electronics and security procedures – bored me, and I sometimes found it hard to keep from falling asleep when reading the material.

At times I would sneak in a book I had borrowed from the base library and surreptitiously read it, hiding it inside the pages of the Navy manual I was supposed to be studying.

One of the requirements of the school was to attain a certain proficiency in typing because a large part of a Radioman's time was spent typing messages. In those days Radiomen used big, bulky teletypes. (Nowadays "Information System Technicians," who perform the functions Radiomen did, use computers.) I never had any problem typing except for one week when I had to come in a couple of nights to catch up to the speed I was supposed to be at.

A few times other students offered me the answers to some of the tests we were scheduled to take. I never accepted, even when I was behind, but not so much because I thought it was unethical as it was for the fact I really did want to learn what I was supposed to do as a Radioman because I wanted to be able to do my job without any problems after I was assigned to the fleet.

*

My third weekend into Radio school I took the train from San Diego to Los Angeles. I was excited because I felt that, because of the television set in my living room, like a part of me had grown up in Los Angeles and I wanted to see where my dreams had been manufactured.

I got off the train in L.A. and took a cab to Sunset Boulevard. I looked for downtown Hollywood and found there wasn't one. I found Hollywood and Vine, which I thought was the center of the entertainment

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/4

industry in the world, but there was absolutely no entertainment. The first person I saw when I got to the corner was a bag lady.

“Do you want a date?” she mumbled to me as I walked past. Or was she just talking to herself? I wasn’t sure. I walked into a deli and sat down. The deli seemed to typify what I’d seen in L.A. up to that point. It was sterile. Everything seemed to have declined down to the lowest common denominator. As I looked about me I saw that Grand Rapids didn’t have a monopoly on being a cultural wasteland. Los Angeles had that distinction too, but L.A. had a vastly greater effect on the culture of the country. Lowest common denominator entertainment represented by lowest common denominator situation comedies, not to speak of lowest common denominator government, lowest common denominator families and lowest common denominator love affairs. How was one to transcend the lowest common denominator?

The deli looked like it was new but I thought it tacky with its linoleum floor and counter, and metal chairs with foam rubber cushions covered with plastic. The eating utensils were made out of plastic. The advertising signs were made of plastic. And the food tasted like it was made out of plastic as well. The deli was a place of transience and impermanence - a place you’d stop at on the way to somewhere else. But you’d only stop there because you had to stop and it was the only stop. Once you did your time there - for some sin you forgot you’d committed - you could move on. I ordered a coffee and they gave it to me in a plastic cup.

When I walked outside I noticed that one of my shoes was untied. Bending down to tie the lace I saw a star on the sidewalk and a movie star’s name on it. I was on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. I felt like I should have been excited to be there, but the excitement didn’t come. I thought that the Walk of Fame would be in an area with skyscrapers and crowds and people hustling and bustling around. Instead, it was in a place that reminded me of a bus terminal or a public lavatory, except that there were palm trees and smog. I walked a few more blocks down Hollywood Boulevard, cars going past. Bus stops. Parking lots with palm trees here and there. Pink buildings. Jesus Freaks preaching on the corners. I saw Mann’s Chinese theater and an old man standing in front of it gripping a cane and sporting a gray stubble of beard on his face. He pulled a sandwich out of his pocket and took a bite.

The sun shone brightly through the polluted air of Hollywood and I sweated as I looked for a motel room. I found one on Sunset Boulevard, checked in, then walked around the neighborhood. A pretty woman with short, red hair walked down the street, and looking at her I felt something stir inside my gut. My spine tingled and I wanted her, though I didn’t know how to tell her. “Hello,” I said as she was a few feet from me. She turned her face away, ignoring me, and a car honked. The volume of the noise of the traffic seemed to increase. I continued walking up a gradually ascending hill and looked at much larger hills in the distance, impressed by their natural beauty. But I couldn’t see too far. It seemed the sun’s rays were trying to blind me as they beat down on the concrete desert I was walking through. Yes, beauty was out there, but it was beyond my reach. A Mothers of Invention song came to mind “...I take a walk down Sunset Boulevard to Crescent Heights and Laurel Canyon and I’m confronted with a vast quantity of...plastic people,”[1] Frank Zappa intoned. When I

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/4

got to the corner of Sunset Boulevard and Laurel Canyon there was no one walking on the sidewalk like me, just a few cars going past. The corner had some trees on it and it looked like Crescent Heights led up to a nice neighborhood. I wondered if Frank Zappa was up in that neighborhood and if he were, what I would say to him if I had the chance. I was sure I could have thought of more than "hello."

I was tired from the train ride and the walking and returned to my room. I sat down on the bed, scratched my face and felt the layer of smog that had been collecting on my skin. I turned on the TV and watched the news. Besides the local traffic jams, car accidents, robberies and muggings there were reports from Southeast Asia about Vietnamese troops in Cambodia and the border war between China and Vietnam, as well as reports from the Middle East about the revolution in Iran. I had worn a short-sleeved shirt all day, but it was February and as the sun set I was beginning to feel a little chilly so I put on my jean jacket. I watched the rest of the news as I listened to a couple making passionate love next door, their bed periodically slamming into the wall next to the headboard I was leaning against. Tired, but not sleepy, I couldn't think of anything to do alone in my motel room except watch the TV. However, when a situation comedy came on I decided to go outside again. Before I did I washed the film of smog from my face, gargled with water from the sink and combed my short hair.

I walked out into the final moments of dusk and found more of the same that I'd experienced during the day. I tried to start another conversation with another attractive woman, but she ignored me, as the other woman had ignored me earlier in the day.

"Look at his short hair!" I heard a different woman say. I turned to see the woman who said it – yet another pretty young woman - talking with her boyfriend and laughing at me. Later, a middle-aged man in a Hawaiian shirt walking down the street tried to strike up a conversation, but it was obvious to me that he was a homosexual on the prowl and I told him I had to go. I continued walking around Hollywood, eventually passing numerous hookers on the street. Some of them said "hello" to me, and I returned their salutations, but I saw nothing in them I wanted. Giving up on finding nirvana in Hollywood I returned to my hotel room after an hour or so, wrote down my impressions of Los Angeles in my notebook and went to sleep. Then, after another day and night in L.A., I returned to San Diego.

*

During boot camp, when we went to the dental clinic to get our teeth checked, a tall, thin seventeen-year old recruit in our company was told his teeth were so rotten that the Navy had to extract them all. After boot camp he was sent to San Diego to go to Signalman school and I found myself with him one day on Broadway Street, near the YMCA. We played pinball in an arcade and went into a porno shop where we thumbed through magazines.

"Do you wanna get laid?" Sanders asked through his false teeth. "I do," he said excitedly, as I gazed at a woman in *Oui* magazine who bore an uncanny resemblance to my ex-girlfriend – who'd dumped me after I'd graduated from high school.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/4

"I don't wanna get laid if I have to pay for it," I said, knowing that no woman except for a prostitute would care to make love with a Navy sailor.

"Well, there's a Filipino lady up the street who says she'll fuck me for thirty bucks. I'm going for it," Sanders said, licking his lips. As he did I smelled something rancid and turned to see a street person dressed in rags coming into the store. The tackiness and dirtiness I had seen in LA had followed me to San Diego's Broadway Street. I could hardly stand to be there, much less drink, eat, sleep or fuck there. Nevertheless, destiny had placed me there, and there was no escape.

We walked out of the porno shop and up Broadway to the Plaza - a small, seedy park.

"Let's just get some beer," I said as we sat on a bench next to a guy who looked to be a few years older than us. He was oblivious to us - nodding off again and again.

We found a liquor store that sold us beer even though we were underage. Then we went to the end of Broadway Street, near the harbor, to drink a six-pack of tall boys. Sanders opened a pack of cigarettes he'd bought and I took one.

"I'm gonna enjoy myself in the Navy, Don. Like the RPOC* said when we were in boot camp marching and singing that one song about eating pussy!"

"Pussy's about the only thing you can eat since you don't have any teeth," I told him, then lit the cigarette.

"I'm gonna go see that Filipino lady. You sure you don't wanna come with me? She'll probably charge less for two people," he said as we finished our last can of beer.

"No thanks," I said. "I don't wanna come with you - and come to think of it I don't wanna fuck the same chick you do and get your come on me either. Enjoy yourself, but don't get any diseases."

"If you get a disease you just go to sick bay and they'll give you a shot of penicillin," Sanders said.

"I'd rather jack off than pay for it," I told him. "See ya later."

I took the bus back to the base, went to bed and jacked off - fantasizing about the women in the porno magazines I'd been looking at - while Sanders went back up Broadway Street to pay thirty dollars for a dose of clap from a Filipina woman who, he told me later, was married to a Signalman out at sea in the Western Pacific.

A couple weeks later I found out that Sanders had gotten arrested for soliciting another prostitute in one of the periodic sweeps that the police made of the Broadway area.

*

My time in Radio school continued to progress smoothly and as in high school I learned more on my own than I did doing what I was assigned to do. I spent many hours in the base library going through magazines and books, and listening to records, punctuating my studies with swimming in the base pool and visits to the beach at Coronado. I didn't

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/4

care much for drinking beer and playing pool as most sailors spent most of their time doing, but I did a little of that as well.

One day in the small room I shared with three other sailors on the base, my roommates and I were talking about our lives in the civilian world.

"My dad prescribed medicine for Howard Hughes," Bob Tyler, a brown-haired, blue-eyed 19 year old with acne said. "My dad and Howard Hughes were friends and flew airplanes together."

"Bullshit," I said.

"You don't have to believe me if you don't want to. I don't care."

"If your dad's a doctor why the hell did you join the Navy?" I asked.

"I wanted to get away from home and travel just like you did," Tyler told me.

"I read Howard Hughes was a heroin addict," I continued.

"My dad was the one who prescribed medicine for him."

"You can't prescribe heroin," I said.

"You can prescribe other opiates," Tyler countered. "Anyway, Howard Hughes could get any drug if he wanted it bad enough."

"I read that before he died he grew his hair long and didn't shave and didn't cut his fingernails, but couldn't stand to be dirty," I told him as I lit one of the cigarettes that someone had given me earlier at the Enlisted Men's Club on base. "I read that all he would eat was ice cream and candy and that he'd lost all his teeth."

As I was exhaling tobacco smoke another roommate, a black SEALs candidate named Joe White, walked in the door with a cup of ice cream, eating it with a flat wooden spoon.

"What are you talking about?" he asked between bites.

"Howard Hughes," I said.

"Yeah, I saw that stuff about Howard Hughes on TV," White said, putting the wooden spoon back in the ice cream. "There was that guy that wrote that book about him. Then they found out the book was a fake." White then finished his ice cream, put the spoon inside the paper cup, crunched them up with his fist and threw them in the shitcan** next to his rack.

"That's what Tyler's story is – a hoax. Right, Tyler? I give up. You had me fooled for awhile," I said.

"Like I said, I don't care if you believe me or not." Tyler was lying on top of his rack, and put his hand down his pants to scratch his testicles.

White took off his shoes, shirt and pants and crawled into his rack. It was midnight. "Quit fuckin' playin' with yourself," White said as he looked over at Tyler.

"I'm not playin' with myself. I'm scratchin' my balls," Tyler told him.

"You oughta put that Howard Hughes shit in a book, like that

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/4

writer did. You'd make some money," I told him as I too crawled into my rack. "But before you do that could ya turn out the light?"

"I don't have to worry about money. My dad's got all the money he wants. If I want any all I have to do is ask him."

"You must be insecure or something. Trying to get us to believe all this shit. What are you tryin' to do, get us to like ya or something?" White asked.

"Look, I don't need you to like me."

*

Soon after, when I was asleep, a ghost named Howard Hughes came to haunt me. He had long hair and was missing all his teeth. His fingernails were long and twisted because they hadn't been cut in years. He had scars on his arms, legs and neck from shooting up – mainlining morphine and heroin. The Howard Hughes apparition reminded me of one of the people I'd seen on Hollywood Boulevard during my trip to Los Angeles.

He opened his mouth to reveal a large black hole that looked like it would suck me up if I weren't able to resist. It resembled the way Sanders' mouth looked just after he'd gotten all his teeth extracted, before he got his bridge. I could make out the scars in Howard Hughes' gums from where he'd shot up. I wanted desperately to move but I was frozen in my sleep.

This Howard Hughes apparition brought to mind one of the junkies William Burroughs wrote about in *Naked Lunch*. But this junkie in front of me needed more than just opiates to survive. In my dream-state I was certain that this junkie needed my soul. I still couldn't move, and the harder I tried the more frozen my body became.

Howard Hughes was naked except for a pair of underpants. As he began to disrobe I was reminded of all the rumors and sea stories I'd heard in my first few months in the Navy. "When you get to the fleet they initiate you by fucking you in the ass," was the one I'd heard more than any other. Howard Hughes was gonna fuck me in the ass, I feared. In addition to the scars on his arms, legs, neck and gums I noticed there were scars on his scrotum too. Perhaps he'd spent too much time scratching his balls, but more likely the scars were from shooting up. Howard moved closer toward me and I realized that in order to live I had to kill him.

I sensed a stream or a small waterfall somewhere nearby. Finally, I was finally able to muster the energy to open my eyes, after having been paralyzed – only to be confronted with the sight of Howard Hughes' doctor's son standing at the foot of my rack, pissing in his sleep. The stream was getting higher and higher and beginning to hit my mattress.

"What the fuck!" I yelled.

Tyler came out of his somnambulant daze.

"What's wrong with you, you sonofabitch?" I demanded.

Tyler woke up from his sleepwalking and stopped pissing. "I'm sorry, man. I thought I was in the bathroom."

"This ain't the bathroom. This is my fuckin' rack!" I told him.

Tyler backed away from my rack and stupidly looked through his

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/4

dirty clothes. When he found a couple of towels he cleaned up the mess.

I let him wallow in his humiliation as I went back to sleep, confident that none of the piss had gotten too close to my feet.

The next day Tyler stripped my rack, washed my bed linen, and cleaned my mattress with ammonia.

I came back from breakfast to see Tyler at work.

"I'm sorry, man," Tyler told me.

"It's alright, man," I told him, "I'm not pissed off at ya...Excuse the pun. Just don't do it when ya get to the fleet. They ain't gonna think it's funny." I let the words sink in for a few seconds. "Howard Hughes ain't gonna help ya when you get to the fleet."

"Have a good day," I said. Then, after picking up the USN Radio manuals I'd need for morning classes, along with a copy of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* that I'd checked out at the library, I walked out the door. A few weeks later, in early May 1979, I graduated from Radioman school with flying colors and was assigned to a ship homeported in San Francisco Bay, the USS *Coral Sea*, one of the Navy's oldest aircraft carriers – where more adventures awaited me.

*RPOC: *Recruit Petty Officer in Charge*, subordinate to the Company Commander and Assistant Company Commander, but chosen by them as leader of the recruits in a boot camp company in the Navy. In our case our RPOC was a Vietnam veteran who after several years away from the military enlisted in the Navy – shortly after coming home early one evening to see his wife performing fellatio on their next-door neighbor. While marching one day through a cold, bitter snowstorm he led us in singing songs about "drinking beer, eating pussy and smoking dope." He was replaced shortly after at the insistence of several officers who'd overheard us.

**shitcan: Navy lingo for *wastebasket*.

[1] This is not a direct quote, but it is inspired by Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention:

Frank Zappa, "Plastic People," *Absolutely Free*, Verve, 1967

—

Don MacLaren is a Navy veteran and a graduate of UC Berkeley. He has published articles, letters, memoir, stories and poems in journals such as *TIME*, *Newsweek*, *Business Week*, *The Japan Times*, *Japan Today*, *The Tenderloin Times*, *Danse Macabre* and the *Haight Ashbury Literary Journal*. He currently resides in Jiangsu Province, China, where he teaches at a high school and writes in his free time.