

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

Terry Kitchen

MY FIRST CASE: A MEM-NOIR

by Sammy Markham, Junior (as told to Terry Kitchen)

I was born in the City of Angels on a rainy night, the kind that makes million-dollar mansions slide down Laurel Canyon into five-way intersections in West Hollywood. My dad had been kicked off the force for not taking bribes and had gone into business for himself, and we were living off Sepulveda in a two room bungalow behind his office. My mom could have been any one of a hundred dames, but she never stepped forward to claim me. "Dames is trouble," my dad always said, while shaving or between innings at Dodger games, "especially when they're clients."

My dad, Sam Sr., was off working an angle on the Avocado Pit murders, and I was playing on the driveway under the watchful eye of Mrs. Carmello next door. She always had her hair in curlers, even when she went out at night, but she poured a mean glass of lemonade. I had just finished a tall one and was back on my Big Wheel when a shadow crossed my path. We weren't due for any clouds for another three months so I knew something was up. I slammed my PF Flyers down on the pavement and stopped on a Roosevelt.

"Westwood Detective Agency?" Asking was a buck-toothed blonde who must have been four feet in her mother's high heels, which she was wearing. She was two years shy of a training bra, but she was a looker, the kind we shot spitballs at at St. Mary's when the nuns were busy writing the names of the saints on the blackboard.

"Maybe it is and maybe it isn't." I had another fifty laps to pedal, then more lemonade, so I didn't need her or her mom's stilettos.

"Please, you've got to help me. It's Mr. French. He's gone missing."

I knew Mr. French. He was the fatso butler on TV with the beard and the bogus accent. "Maybe he ran off with Mrs. Livingston," I said, amused by my own cleverness. But I was kidding; like any kid in Tinseltown I knew that people from one show never meet people from another show.

"Not *that* Mr. French, dummy. My hamster."

She had quite a mouth on her, and I found myself wondering what kind of bubbles those lips could blow. Then *pop*, and it's six hours of getting gum out of your hair. Maybe my dad was right. "Hamster, huh? Bet our cat could find him."

"Don't you *dare!*" She was carrying her mom's purse, and let me have it right on the occipital. Fun is fun, but everyone has their limit, and mine is being hand-bagged by a side-saddler in the privacy of my own driveway. I rose out of my Big Wheel and towered under her. Even without heels, she had four inches on me since girls mature faster than boys. But I didn't have a decade to wait.

"Let's get one thing straight," I said, grabbing her wrist. "*I'm* the detective. *You're* the client. Any vases to be broken over bad guys' heads et cetera is *my* turf. *Capice?*"

"So you'll take the case?"

"If you think you can afford me."

She gave me her retainer and I slipped it in my mouth. I knocked on Mrs. Car-

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

mello's door and told her I was going to my friend Eddie's to watch *Ultraman*. I'd call if I was staying for dinner.

Bec – Rebecca for short – led me down the block. At the stoplight I had the strange urge to hold her hand crossing the street. I resisted because a) this wasn't kindergarten anymore, and b) my dad's first rule is never get involved with a client. He'd only broken it once, and gotten me as a souvenir. I didn't need some wheel-spinning hamster holding me down.

Her place was way up the snoot scale from mine, with blue jacarandas, purple bougainvilleas, and a red Ferrari in the drive. That hamster could be anywhere.

Bec's mother was in a gold-plated living room watching a soap, sucking down gin-and-Perrier with a straw. No wonder Bec needed Mr. French to spill her guts to. My dad wasn't around much, but at least when he was we'd talk about stuff over our corned beef hash – Steve Garvey's latest hitting streak, how big breasts might be fake, how the LAPD will use any excuse to bust your balls.

Bec made me take off my Flyers, then led me upstairs. Her room was almost as fancy schmancy as the downstairs, with a pink-on-white color scheme that made me want to ralph – it felt like I was walking on a birthday cake. The empty hamster cage, with its scent of wood shavings and hamster poop, sat next to a bookshelf full of Trixie Beldens and Happy Hollisters. The cage was more like an aquarium, four glass walls with a screen window for a ceiling, a brick on each corner of the screen. Frenchy would have to be Mighty Mouse to have escaped unaided. I was starting to get a bad feeling in my tummy, and not just from the smell.

“When's the last time you saw him?”

“Before I left for camp.”

“Day camp or sleep away?”

“Sleep away.”

“Any brothers or sisters?”

“I'm an only child.”

Of course she was. I was too. Maybe we needed each other. “I need to interview the witnesses.”

“Witnesses?”

“Your mom. Whoever else was around.”

“Just my mom. She said Mr. French was here last time she fed him.”

“I'm the detective, Bec. *I* do the interview.”

Mrs. Bec's Mom was still on the couch, watching Dinah Shore, a fresh gin-and-Perrier in hand. I didn't waste time with small talk. “We found him,”

She didn't look up, so I stepped between her and Dinah. “I said, we found him.”

“Hey! Who the hell are you? Where's Bec?”

“In her room. She asked me to stop by help find her hamster.”

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

"Uh, okay. Want some chocolate milk?"

Maybe I did and maybe I didn't, but I wasn't going to be put off that easy. "No thanks. I was just going. Like I said, we found him."

"You...found him? Mr. French? But..."

"Yeah, under the bed. He must have knocked one of the bricks off."

Mrs. Bec's Mom looked confused, but pulled herself together. "Um, that's great. Um, how...is he?"

"I think you know." I gave her my evil eye, like my dad does when he's trying to crack a suspect. Or Mrs. Carmello does when she notices some cookies are missing.

Mrs. Bec's Mom might have been wilting on the inside, but outside she was a cherry freeze-pop. "Think I know what? You're the one said you found him."

"I lied."

"Huh?"

"I said I lied."

"You shouldn't lie," she said by rote, adult scolding child.

"Look who's talking, lush life."

"*What* did you say? I don't know who you think you are, kid..."

"Sammy Markham Junior, Westwood Detective Agency. And if I were a cop, you'd be busted."

We had Mr. French's funeral that afternoon. Luckily the trash truck hadn't come for a few days, so the body was still in the plastic barrel in Bec's garage, wrapped in multiple plastic bags. Bec's mom had confessed: she'd come in to feed Mr. French, and found him stiff as a board on his exercise wheel. She'd claimed she was planning to go to the pet store and get a replacement so Bec would never know, but she never got around to it. I think she just hated the smell of hamster poop in her gold-plated palace, but Dad said she was probably jealous that her daughter had something else to love. One more screwed-up dame. Just what the world needs.

I dug the hole, beneath a bougainvillea. Bec wore her mom's heels and carried her mom's purse. Bec said a few words about what a good furry little friend Mr. French had been, then I covered in the hole. Bec invited me in for chocolate milk afterwards. I gave her her retainer back, and she walked me to the corner. If she'd crossed the street, I would have taken her hand.

That night at dinner, over a can of half-heated Dinty Moore, I told my dad about the funeral, and the strange warm feeling I had in tummy as I watched Bec cry.

"Ah, Sammy," he said, stopping his spoon in mid air. "Funny thing about dames. They mess you up big time, but you kinda like it."

I think knew what he meant.