

The First Two Pages: “Garbo’s Ghost” by M.E. Proctor

From *The Most Dangerous Games*, edited by Deborah Well (Level Best Books)

An Essay by M.E. Proctor

How could I resist the call Level Best Books put out in the Spring of 2024? “*Step into the shadows and fog of Hollywood's golden era. We are seeking short story submissions for an anthology inspired by the film noir classics of the 1940s and '50s.*”

At the time, Russell Thayer and I were polishing the final draft of *Bop City Swing*, a retro-noir set in 1951 San Francisco that featured my homicide detective, Tom Keegan, and Russell’s killer-for-hire, Gunselle. For six months I’d been up to my eyeballs in trench coats and fedoras, while squinting in (fictional) cigarette smoke and downing old-fashionedes with two cherries (I confess, these were occasionally real). The music, jazz, was first-rate.

I was in the perfect state of mind, and I had the perfect character for the job, right there at my fingertips. In a flurry of published short stories on top of the book in progress, Tom Keegan had dealt with an artist who set himself on fire, mobsters passing Nazi counterfeit money in gambling dens, mothballed ferries in Sausalito, a dead dancer clad in sequins in Golden Gate Park, a stiff wrapped in chains dumped in the harbor, trafficked Vietnamese girls... the man had a star-studded caseload. These stories were dipped in noir, and any could have met the anthology submission call requirements. Did Tom have the shoulders for another assignment? Sure. He could do a stint in Hollywood, play

tough with the best of them, and get a taste of movie shenanigans. Los Angeles was more pleasant, weather-wise, than San Francisco in the winter.

I just had to give him a good excuse to go down there.

I'm a long-time fan of classic noir—*The Big Sleep*, *The Killers*, *Out of the Past*... The genre offers plenty of opportunities to misbehave. Off the top of my head I can't recall many that feature an honest cop as the lead. Except for *Laura*, a favorite and a bit of an outlier. I pondered... What about a mixed drink? A touch of James Ellroy's *L.A. Quartet* for the hard knocks. Humanity at its ugliest, blood and gore (that wouldn't pass the gauntlet of the Hays Code), the daily diet of a homicide cop. Then layered on top of that, the glossy unreal world of Hollywood. A hint of Mark McPherson in Laura's artificial world. But taking a dark step further and making illusion an accessory to murder.

"Garbo's Ghost" turned ethereal beauty into a beast with fangs. Here is how the story starts.

Murderers that messed with their victims' bodies held a special place in Tom Keegan's vision of Hell. The torturers, mutilators, and collectors that his Homicide colleagues bundled together as *Crazies*. For Tom they were more and less. More vicious and less human. He'd seen soldiers freak out in Bastogne, and he'd been close to losing it when their jeeps entered the camps. He knew there were more kinds of crazy than there were varieties of apples.

The *Chronicle* would slap a nickname on the killer that disemboweled Seaman 1st Class Jerry Larson from Cudahy, Wisconsin, at the Mt Davidson cross, Saturday night—monster, ogre, goblin. Mythical creatures.

This horror was only too real.

"It needs to stay out of the newspaper, Tom," the medical examiner said.

“The people that found the body talked to reporters.”

“The boy was alive when he was cut open.”

Tom turned his back on the butchered flesh on the slab and fumbled in his pockets for his smokes. The doc took him by an arm and steered him toward the hallway.

“He can’t have been alive for long,” Tom said.

“Too long. The killer was proficient with a scalpel.”

“How can you tell, in that mess?”

“The edges are clean cuts.” The doc’s voice was strained.

“The boy was tied to the cross. Standing. Fibers are embedded in his wrists and ankles. I’ll test for narcotics.”

Tom lit a cigarette. “It’s a hike to the cross. He didn’t carry the kid all the way.”

“There might have been more than one aggressor.”

That was even more disturbing, somehow.

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Tom went back to the Mt Davidson park. The scene was cordoned off and uniforms stood watch. It was raining and the November wind discouraged the gawkers that tended to congregate near disasters.

“The rain will wash it all off in no time,” one of the officers said.

The blood stains on the lower part of the monument were consistent with the medical examiner’s observations. Jerry Larson had been propped up, then cut loose and left to crumble in the grass. His uniform, cap, socks, and undergarments had been found in a pile nearby, no blood stains on them. The shoes were missing. The rope used to tie him up was nowhere to be found.

Tom sneezed. Water ran in a steady stream from his soggy fedora down his neck.

A brutal murder, mutilations. A real-life abomination has been let loose.

We have a good grasp of the kind of cop Tom is. What he’s been through in the war and how it still lingers. It hasn’t made him indifferent to suffering, and horror still shocks him, even if he makes a point of not showing it. The case is already shaping up to be hard on all involved. Even the medical examiner is rattled.

The young sailor had come to shore with a gaggle of shipmates. They hit the bars closest to the harbor, then made their way into town for more exotic entertainment. They scattered all over the International Settlement, swarming the Pacific Street cabarets, dance halls, and gambling parlors. In the smoke of cheap cigars and the vapors of harsh liquor, none of the boys could tell when or where they'd last seen Jerry Larson. They didn't remember where they went, all that neon blended together after six in the tank.

Tom talked to the MPs who patrolled the perimeter. He showed Larson's picture in every watering hole on the Street and got no bites. In their blue uniforms, all these kids looked the same. He asked if anybody had noticed anything unusual, and the laughter he got in response made clear that when the boys were in town, the definition of *unusual* had to be seriously amended.

Millie, a dancer at the Bird of Paradise, was on a break when she saw a sailor get in a blue Chevrolet sedan. She noticed because her boyfriend drove the exact same car and she wondered what he was doing in San Francisco when he was supposed to be in San Diego.

"It wasn't Roy behind the wheel." She smiled, relieved she wasn't two-timed. "That guy was bigger." She puffed on the cigarette she bummed from Tom. "The woman was a knock-out."

"What did they look like?"

She tilted her head. "Not being mercenary and all ..."

"I'll buy you a drink or a slice of pie, Millie."

"I wouldn't mind a steak," she said, practical.

They went to a corner restaurant, sticky tabletops and crooked chairs.

"It's hard work on that stage," she said. "Girls drop like flies."

She had a healthy appetite. Tom sprung for a red wine that came in an anonymous bottle.

"I didn't see the guy's face." Millie wiped her mouth before taking a generous swallow of wine. Her cheeks colored. The plonk was the kind of vintage that dissolved cooking grease. "I had a good look at the woman when she talked to the sailor. She had a perfect face, classy. Just like Greta Garbo. An expensive broad." A chuckle. "For sure my Roy wasn't in that car!"

"What did the sailor do?"

"Whaddya think? He hopped in the back."

Tom pushed his dinner plate to the side. The congealing steak juices made him queasy. "You ever saw her before?"

“Not in real life.”

“Meaning?”

“As I said, she was a dead ringer for Garbo, like she was in *Camille*, so romantic.” There was mist in Millie’s eyes. Might have been the wine ...

I love Millie, a hoofer as hardboiled as the guys. Tom is still in San Francisco at this point, but not for long. The case is going nowhere. No trace of a Garbo look-alike, no blue Chevy, no other sightings of the young sailor. It’s January 1951 now, rainy and cold. Tom hopes something will come from his contacts with other police departments, cross-country. He knows that the kind of creep he’s hunting only stops when forced to. That’s when the San Francisco chief of police decides his morose top detective would benefit from a change of scenery. Bill Parker, recently appointed chief in L.A., needs experienced officers to help him whip the LAPD into shape and root out corruption. Tom, not happy about being pulled off his investigation because his boss wants to be friendly with a colleague, is detached down south for a few weeks. He’s given menial tasks in Los Angeles. He’s bored, irritated. Of course he’ll poke at his case again. What better place to look for a Garbo carbon copy than Hollywood? Beauty is attracted to the silver screen like a moth to the flame.

A few stars show up in the story, snapshots more than cameos, but the camera lingers on the not so glamorous sideshows. The sleazy second-rate talent agencies, the hopeful about to become hopeless, the appetites stirred by the lure of juicy production money. Add to that the sulfurous reputation of the LAPD and the frustration of talented female police auxiliaries. No wonder Tom is in a

hurry to go back to his city by the bay. They're slightly more civilized up there.

He will get one glance at a sandy beach, but that's it.

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M.E. Proctor was born in Brussels and lives in Texas. She's the author of the Declan Shaw detective mysteries: *Love You Till Tuesday* and *Catch Me on a Blue Day* (Shotgun Honey Books). She's the author of a short story collection, *Family and Other Ailments*, and the co-author of a retro-noir novella, *Bop City Swing*. Short fiction in *Vautrin*, *Tough*, *Rock and a Hard Place*, *Bristol Noir*, *Mystery Tribune*, *Reckon Review*, and *Black Cat Weekly* among others. She's a Shamus and Derringer short story nominee. Author Website: www.shawmystery.com. On Substack: <https://meproctor.substack.com>.