

“Never Trust a Gun”

(a chapter from a novel in progress)

They sat on opposite sides of the darkened office.

“The first time I was in jail was for cutting some men with a bottle,” she said.

“One of them was my boyfriend, and he was a cop.”

Carmen smoked. Except for the streetlight leaking through the jalousies the glow of her cigarette was the only light in the room.

“Actually,” she said, “they were all cops.”

She couldn’t see Augustus sitting across from her in the dark, but she knew he was there. He was waiting for her to tell him his future.

“I had a job at the library and one at the diner, and when I didn’t work I went to night school. For some reason, I thought I might want to be a teacher. I didn’t have a nickel’s worth of time for fooling around, but I was nineteen and when Harry asked me to go with him I thought, why not? At that age, you don’t think you can afford to say no to anything.”

Carmen lit a fresh cigarette from the pack nestled by her thigh and settled back in the old cracked-leather couch. She was determined to tell her story straight through, once, and then never to see Augustus again.

“When Harry wasn’t being a cop he and his pals used to hang around at a cop joint called the Cork in the Irish part of Hoboken. They liked to have me come out and

drink with them. All their friends were cops, and their wives and girlfriends were cop wives and girlfriends, and always at home. I was never at home.

“Pete the barman kept a blackjack in his pocket and ran a pretty up-and-up place for a speakeasy. The story goes when he was still on the force Pete fell asleep drunk one night and set the mattress on fire. He got all burnt up getting his kids out of the house. After that he took the pledge, and then he took his pension and paid off the right people, and opened the Cork. I knew Harry wasn’t the best I could do, but I didn’t think he was the worst, so I used to go and drink with him and his cop friends in the big dark corner booth.

“I didn’t like that booth. They’d get me sitting in the middle, squeezed in with six or seven all together, and they’d pour shots of rye and play these complicated games round the table and at a certain point you had to drink your shot. We played all night. Half his friends were Irish-Irish, you could practically still smell the coal from the boat coming off them, and I couldn’t understand a thing they said. But I knew what they wanted. And before the night was through my legs were blue from being pinched, and my face was red from the things whispered in my ear when Harry wasn’t watching, or said outright when he was, and from the rye.

“The night I went to jail, June had come looking for me at the Cork but I’d gone. I don’t remember why. I probably had words with Harry, but I was half-drunk and wanted to be full drunk, so I went round to the back of the grocery, where there was more liquor and a jukebox, and when I got home the phone was ringing and it was Pete the barman, telling me I’d better come back quick and get my sister.

“I was near legless and there’s a lot I don’t remember. Certain things stand out. I recall Pete yelling. Some of the cops were holding him by the shoulders and he and Harry were bellowing back and forth like two foghorns. They had June in the booth and she was curled up in a ball. I could see her dress was torn right down the front, and I went to pull her by the arm but one of the Irish made a grab for her. I picked a bottle up off the table and swung it against his face, and the feeling as it smashed and cut him, and the sound of his high squeal, made me happy. Not just happy. It filled me with a terrible, brutish, fucking joy. I had the broken bottle by the neck and I swung it again at another fellow and caught him across the cheek, and then I went for Harry. He was red-faced and yelling and I mashed the broken bottle in his pig-red face. They told me later I was singing while I did it.

“They beat me black and bloody and threw me in jail. They only did that because Pete made them. If he hadn’t been there I think they would have just killed me. They put June in jail too, but because she was thirteen they let Bert come bail her out. They kept me there. I won’t tell you about jail.

“They made it up how the two of us had lured the men into the booth to rob them. They built a pretty solid frame up. Well they had to, didn’t they? They couldn’t let it out about what they were doing to June at the bar, and what they did to me in the cell. Anyway, Pete was a decent sort and he talked to the judge. As an old cop he still had some juice, and Harry and his friends were near to being rookies.

“The judge came in and looked at us all. Harry had stitches and plasters across his face like sergeant’s stripes, but the judge looked at him and his friends like they were shit on his shoes. Then he looked over at me and his expression was the same. We were all

shit as far as he was concerned, but then he banged the gavel and let me go. The court was full of cops and they were all yelling and I had to walk through a crowd of them on my way out. The things they said to me, I was shaking.

“The condition of my acquittal was I had to leave Hoboken, so two days later that is what I did, and I came to Hollywood. I wanted June to come with me but she was too young and Bert refused. She came later, and I was so happy at the time, but now I wish to God she had stayed in Hoboken.”

Carmen reached again for the cigarettes and matches by her thigh. For a second the thought of what she and Augustus had done on this couch not an hour ago crossed her mind, and she laughed once, an involuntary noise like a seal bark that bounced around the dark room. She hoped it vexed Gus’s ears as much as it did hers. She lit her cigarette, blew out the match.

“So,” she said, “my real name is Leila Schutz. A producer who was hot for me made me take the name Carmen in the first months I was out here, and O’Neill was my mother’s name.”

Carmen got up from the couch and crossed the dark office to the sideboard where Sam kept the liquor. There was enough light coming through the window from the streetlamp and the neon chop suey sign to just see the grey shapes of furniture, but not enough to read the bottles. She found a glass and filled it with something that turned out to be gin, decided it would do, and crossed back to the couch. Augustus had not stirred or spoken and she wondered if he’d fallen asleep. She wanted him to hear this, and she felt a flash of anger. She sat down and took a gulp of the gin. Then again, what did it really matter?

“June was always the pretty one. She was so blonde. A curvy little blue-eyed thing with a wild energy, like a sunny, crazy day. She was a knockout. Men fell all over themselves around her, in a cute way, an earnest, bumbling way. For the longest time I thought June didn’t elicit any dark fantasies, only bright ones. What an idiot.

“Women were crazy about her too. She was always making friends. Half of that pit of backbiters they call central casting considered June their best friend. Go figure. People would do anything for her. She could have been a star, but she had a devil in her. It never let her work too hard.”

She changed the pitch of her voice, and it was as if a different, younger woman was speaking.

“A casting call at 7:00 am? Too early! What a bore.

“Learn the lines? Who’d say this stuff, anyway?”

She went back to being Carmen.

“It’s true that she had something, everyone saw it, but she never made a dent in pictures. What she was cut out for were the parties. Everyone wanted her at the parties. John Voss picked up on it right away. Oh yes.”

She stubbed out her cigarette.

“The last year she was alive June had her own place up in the hills. I don’t know how she paid for it. Before that we had a place together in Echo Park. It was very un-California, the kind of rickety triple-decker that could have been anywhere. It was awful but we tried to make it nice. We had the apartment in the middle, with the family of Greeks who owned the place downstairs and two Italian boys up above. They were sweet, and both in love with June, of course. They were always finding reasons to come around.

“Sometimes I think, what is my best memory of her? I keep coming back to a day in the spring of ’35, before she left. I was still acting, still trying, anyway, and I was up for a part in a crummy RKO crime picture, *Special Investigator*. I’d auditioned for the role of the secretary and I had some sharp lines. It was only Richard Dix starring, but it was the kind of part I was sure would get me more and better parts, and on this day I didn’t know yet that I hadn’t gotten it. I was still full of hope. A heart full of hope and a head full of nothing. In the end my part went to Margaret Callahan. I know, right? Who the fuck is Margaret Callahan?”

Carmen paused. She laughed again, a sick sound in the dark, and took a sip of gin. She lit another cigarette and with the flare of the match her surroundings leapt into view. In the two seconds before she shook it out she saw Augustus sitting up straight behind Sam’s big desk. His eyes were wide open and on her.

“I went and visited June where she was working on set. She had a part, a nothing role but she threw herself into it. That was the thing about June. Her life was a lark. She’d drive you crazy. But when the camera rolled she became something, she became whatever was required. It was uncanny. She didn’t do anything half way. If you gave her a piece of business, like an orange to peel, and turned the camera on, then she just gave it her full concentration. And as you watched, you’d realize yes, this is true, this is the only way an orange may be peeled. Producers who got tired of her showing up late and not bothering with her lines, and made the casting directors promise not to hire the crazy blonde again, would get to the screening room and see the rushes, and go, ‘wait. Hold the horses, bub. Who is *that*?’

“She was shooting at Metro, on one of the old stages, playing a bellhop in a swank joint. I’ll never forget the picture. *Libeled Lady*, with William Powell. She was all decked out in a tight bright purple suit with rows of brass buttons up her front and a jaunty little pillbox hat. I stood behind the lights and watched her rehearse.

“She had to walk downstage through a crowd and approach a man sitting on a lobby couch and give him a message: ‘Call for you, Mr. Eckhardt!’ The people in the lobby, the extras, were supposed to be important people staying at the hotel, you know, talking business or something, but they all kept turning around to watch June walk past, and the AD had to stop and yell at the extras to *stop watching the girl*. It got so it was funny. Then she’d say her line, and it was just one line but you’d have thought it was Shakespeare.

“So I stood there and watched my sister work. And that day I still thought I was going to be a famous actress, and June was obviously going to be a star, and everything was going to be fine. The world was turning around us and everything was going our way, a moment of perfect attainment. Pure contentment.

“I have a photograph of that day. On her break I went and sat with June on the couch and a unit photographer came and snapped it. Maybe he was sweet on her. Maybe he thought we made a pretty composition. I didn’t even know he took it at the time, June gave it to me later, after I didn’t get the part and I started slinging cocktails at the Trocadero and she moved out. I look at it now and it sets off all my alarm bells. She’s perched next to me on the divan, sitting up straight with her chest out and one leg crossed over the other. She is radiant, some kind of glow just pouring off her, smiling so wide it looks like it’s painted on. I think about the way all the men in the lobby looked at her, in

that tight purple uniform and stupid little pillbox hat, like she was somebody's idea of a toy girl. All dressed up in a doll's uniform. The little girl's hat with the leather strap cinched tight under her chin, and the tight purple top and the brass buttons. She looks like catnip for the wrong kind of cat.

“Anyway, wardrobe let her keep the hat.

“I didn't see her much after she moved out. She made the jump from extra when Emblem took her as a contract player, and she was always at parties or at work, though I kept looking for her onscreen and never found her. And she never asked me to the parties, though I was dying to go. She had a small place in the hills, a nice little redwood bungalow tucked in amongst the trees off Topanga, not fancy, but I didn't see how she could afford it. I only saw it once while she lived there. I saw it again after she died, but someone had been through it and all her things were gone. Like she'd never been there.

“When they found her at first they wouldn't let me see her body. You couldn't believe the state it was in: cigarette burns, bite marks. A cop told me this. He was trying to be helpful but it made me sick, insane. I wanted to kill people. Fucking cops.

“When they finally let me identify her they told me they didn't know how she died, but that's a lie. She was found at the bottom of a canyon. They said she probably slipped and fell. They said animals got to her. Sure they did. The opossums tied her hands and feet with boat cordage, and the coyotes burned her with cigarettes. There was no inquest, no investigation. How a girl can have those things done to her and there be no investigation is something you'd have to ask the cops. I did ask them. I asked them, and they had to restrain me. They put me in the drunk tank, and when they let me out they told me June's boss, Mr. Voss, had kindly paid my fines and arranged to have June

buried in a closed casket. Cops are a piece of fucking work wherever you go. I was only a little drunk, by the way.

“Bert came and we buried her at Forest Lawn. All June’s friends were there. Everyone who ever knew her, girls from central casting, grips and costume and makeup and lighting guys. A lifeguard. Waitresses. The two Italian brothers from upstairs came and stood holding their hats and they cried. Everyone cried. The studio sent an assistant production chief and an enormous flower arrangement for over the grave but no John Voss. No one remarked it but I noticed. We put her in the ground and the next day Bert went home. I thought he might stay but he didn’t. I mean, his daughter is buried here but he didn’t stay. That’s the last time I saw him.

“It took awhile, but after that I just sort of gave up and hit bottom. There’s a lot I don’t remember, and I’d rather not say most of the rest. What I will say is that working at the Trocadero I met all sorts of people and I just sort of lost myself. To men. To booze. Reefer. Cocaine. I tried everything and liked it all, more than I’m comfortable admitting. It was summer, and we spent nights in the hills or on the beach, clothed in moonlight, shameless as animals. We drank gin on sand that glowed like pale fire. The sea was black and the sky was black and we ran across the sand and fucked in the sea. It was like death, and when we came out again not dead it was like rebirth. Then we had more gin and the feeling of rebirth went away. This went on all summer. I don’t have to paint you a picture.

“Anyway,” she said. “That’s not what I want to tell you. What I want to tell you is about John Voss. And when I’ve told you that, I expect you to know why I won’t ever see you again after tonight.”

Carmen stopped talking and the glow from her cigarette shone on her face like a car headlight illuminating some creature in the road, just before it bounded into the woods on the verge.

“It was the night of my last arrest. That was my most complete humiliation, up until you and Elsa. My degradation. I’d been drinking and feeling sorry for myself, but when wasn’t I? On a Sunday night after another weekend obliterating myself in the jazz places and the hop houses I was sick, and so tired. I was tired of trying to push away the idea that when they took away June they took away everything that was worth anything in my life. On my own I was worthless, no good for anything but puking up a bellyful of god knows what and passing out in somebody’s bed and then doing it all over again. And I finally let it dawn on me that my life was shit and I just wanted it to stop.

“I suppose I wanted to kill myself. I certainly wanted to die. Some man had given me a little gun for some reason. For protection? For a favor? I couldn’t remember, but I looked for it everywhere and found it in the bedroom and I stood and looked at it. It was a beautiful thing. Nickel-plated, palm-sized, with an ivory handle grip. It spoke to me. It told me it that it wanted to be used; that it was made for a purpose and it wanted to fulfill its purpose. And I realized I too was made for a purpose and I must fulfill it. I also wanted to be used. So I resolved to shoot myself, and for a minute I felt such relief!

“But then a thought intruded. It came from the gun, in the form of a question. Why should I seek an end and the people responsible go on? What if my purpose wasn’t to kill myself, but someone else? This was the question, and in answer the gun told me terrible things about John Voss and his friends, about his parties where terrible things

happened to young girls. *What do you think happened to June*, Gun asked? *Don't let something terrible happen to you. It was him. You know what to do*, Gun said.

“I was sick. Shaking, sweating, booze-sick and dope-sick. Sick in my heart and my soul. I sniffed a packet of cocaine and felt better. Gun told me to get dressed. I wanted to be invisible, so I put on black pants and a cable sweater and a black coat even though the night was hot and I was bathed in sick-sweat. I dressed as Gun told me, and I went out of my house. The joke was I couldn't find my car. I hadn't any memory of parking it, or to whom I might have lent it, or even if I still owned it. So I called for a cab, and the cabbie came and took one look at me and he drove away. So much for being invisible. I called another one, and this time it took me where I wanted to go.

“I found Voss's address in the phone book, of all things. Now, why would he be listed in the directory? Arrogance. The arrogance of believing himself untouchable; even more, the uttermost arrogance of thinking himself innocent. It was galling. I ordered the cab to stop at an empty spot on the road some distance away down the canyon. I daresay he was glad to do it. A crazed woman in black at a desolate spot in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night: He would have been glad to get home, and climb into bed with a sleeping woman, and think himself safe and all right with the world.

“I walked up a hillside through the trees. It was bright moonlight and I could see the trees still and glowing like soft candles, as if every one was lit from within. Maybe it was the cocaine. I stopped near the top of the hill and sniffed another packet. In the intense moonlight I could see the sweat glistening on every hair of my arm. The house sat in a perfect bowl down the other side of the hill. It was big, dull, ostentatious, done up

like an English castle, though once I got close I saw it wasn't real stone, only stupid California stucco.

"It was after 2:00 and no one stirred. I walked down the back side of the hill and across the yard. There was a pool – of course there was a pool – and bathhouses and guesthouses and then the main house. Every light was off. I checked all the doors, and a bulkhead leading to the basement was open and I got in that way. I stumbled through a storeroom in the dark. I suppose I made some noise, but all I could hear was my heart beating in my ribs like it was trying to get out. My tongue felt swollen and my lips were so dry I could taste blood where they cracked, and my breath hissed like a broken teapot on the boil. Finally I just stood still and tried to listen, and gradually, faintly, I heard a voice telling me where to go. I remembered I had the gun in my pocket. I took it out, and Gun directed me. It told me which way to go through all the rooms of that basement. Each room was different, and told a story. Gun and I were shocked.

"There were comfortable rooms, with mirrors and soft beds. There were small rooms with iron cots, and housepainters' tarpaulins on the floor and walls. A large room with Nazi flags and a life-sized portrait of the Fuhrer and smaller portraits of other uniformed men. I recognized a portrait of Voss in uniform. I sat awhile in a room where they screened movies, with plush chairs and a bar. I poured myself a drink and sat in one of the plush chairs, and I tried to imagine what they watched. Oaters, maybe, same as everyone else? I didn't think so. It looked more like home movies.

"I listened to the house breathing in the dark. Finally I got up and Gun directed me to a staircase up to the main floor. The door at the top of the stairs opened on a pantry off the kitchen. I reached to turn on a light and there was a man standing there in a white

coat over pajamas and slippers. He was only some sort of butler or cook, maybe, but when he saw me he gave a great yell, though I suppose what he saw first was Gun even more than me. Gun was large and shining in my hand. Gun was singing, exultant, full of purpose. I was full of purpose, too. I pulled the trigger and on the counter a big bowl of lemons exploded into fragments. The man disappeared and all of a sudden I sagged, deflated. All the certainty left me. The room was absolutely silent and misted with lemons. Just like that my gun's purpose and mine had both been spent.

"I turned and ran back down the basement stairs, back through the rooms, past Hitler and the flags, but Gun was no longer directing me and I took a wrong turning. Instead of the room with the bulkhead I found myself in another room, very small, just one purple velvet divan facing a glass case along the wall. There was no other way out and I turned to run back out the door when something about the glass case caught my eye. Something in the case. The room was tiny and the way the divan was placed it seemed this must be a room for private viewing. What was being viewed?

"Inside the case was a row of objects on a glass shelf, softly lit by an invisible bulb. They were women's things. A hairbrush with red-orange hair in the tines. A pair of folded black silk stockings. A pearl necklace with a complicated clasp. A tiny purple pillbox hat with a broken chinstrap.

"My heart stumbled liked a doped horse. My vision contracted and tunneled, became sharp, and blossomed red. I bolted out of the room and down a hall and there was the bulkhead. I burst out onto the lawn bright with moonlight. The trees were spinning around me and the moonlight was pulsing red. I heard voices from the trees and I fell to my knees on the grass, with my hands over my eyes.

“Then in an instant I was face down with my hands behind my back and a boot on my neck. Trussed, numb, stupid with exhaustion and drained of everything, I was like a cow in the chute; they could have led me to the killing floor, I wouldn’t have minded.

“Then I heard singing. It was Gun singing a victory song in my pocket because its purpose had been fulfilled. Mine had not. Gun had tricked me into shooting too soon, tricked me out of my purpose. I felt hands hauling me upright and I looked into the faces of two cops, their eyes a red glow in the flashing lights.

“‘Never trust a gun,’ I said.

“I guess all they heard was ‘gun’ because they knocked me back down in the grass and put their hands all over me, ripping pockets and groping handfuls of flesh until they found Gun. Then they hauled me up and twisted my arms back to cuff me until it hurt so much I almost fainted, and fast-walked me around the front of the house to where other cops had parked in the drive like a drunken army; cars in the flowerbeds, cars in the grass.

“Voss was there, standing with his hands in the pockets of his robe, talking to a police Lieutenant. There was a woman with him, blonde, very beautiful. They put me in the back of a car and I started yelling at them to check the basement. *Check the basement!* A cop in the front seat told me to shut up, but the Lieutenant came to the car window and said to speak. Voss and the woman came up alongside him.

“I told him everything. I started at the beginning and I told him about June, and the bellhop scene at Metro. I was very calm. I spoke clearly and loudly over the noise of the cops and the radios and the cars idling in the flowerbed. I told him about June dying and the marks on her body. About the beaches and the moonlight; the men and the gin. I

told him about the cocaine and the candle trees, and about Gun telling me where to go and what to do. I told him about the flags and uniforms in the basement, and about the viewing room. I told him about the sick things in the glass case, and finally about June's pillbox hat.

"Then I told him I was sorry for scaring the man in the kitchen, but it wasn't me, really, it was that tricky bastard Gun.

"Finally the Lieutenant put his hand up for me to stop and he turned to Voss. 'Well, John,' he said, 'what about all this?'

"Voss was caught, and I watched his face for signs of fear. I wanted to see him panic, stammer, and flail helplessly. I wanted to see him give up and bring his rotten soul out into the light. I'll never forget it.

"Instead he looked down at me in the backseat with complete understanding. With sorrow in his eyes, and unfeigned pity.

"'She used to be an actress you know,' Voss said. 'Tried to be. Now look at her. Not everyone belongs in the pictures.'

"He stepped up to the Lieutenant and put his hand on his shoulder. 'I wouldn't mind her breaking in to my house. She can have money, God knows I can afford it. But she's a danger. The poor cook's scared to death.'

"'You bastard!' I said, 'You know I'm not here to rob you. You killed June. You have her hat. You fucking killed her.' Without looking at me the Lieutenant reached his arm through the car window and hit me across the mouth. I fell back across the seat, and the Lieutenant withdrew his arm and banged it down hard twice on the roof. The cop car set to motion and pulled away down the driveway. When I looked back at them Voss was

handing out cigarettes to the cops, and the woman was staring at me through the back window. As we receded she saw me watching and gave me a wave.

“That was her, of course. Your friend Elsa, the one you traded me for. She changed her hair but I knew it was her the moment I saw her in the park the other day, when you were trying not to look at her.”

Augustus spoke up for the first time in a long while. In the dark she still couldn't see him any clearer than just the outline of a man.

“It doesn't have to be that way. You're the one I want.”

“This is what you got. I hope you'll be happy. Two peas.”

After a pause Augustus said, “It's just like your screenplay. The house, the moonlight, the basement rooms. Except, in your script you give it to the male lead to search the basement and rescue the girl. You had a hero.”

“That's the pictures,” Carmen said. “Really there are no heroes.”

She lit another cigarette. In the stillness of the room the striking match sounded weirdly loud.

“I don't need a lead,” she said.

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