

# I

WHETHER THIS MEMOIR will turn out to be the world's longest suicide note, or instead the means by which I might elude the abyss, only time can tell: a precise interval of time, in fact, the twenty-five hours that stretch between the present moment, Sunday, October 28, 1984, 11:06 A.M., and my presumed departure tomorrow on the noon shuttle to the airport. Right now the other route by which I may exit this sterile Baltimore hotel — the balcony — is the more alluring. I need merely cross the room, slide back the glass door, step onto the terrace, and avail myself of the hundred-foot drop to the parking lot.

Appearances are deceiving. Just because you're reading my story, that doesn't mean I lost my nerve and took the shuttle bus. The proper inference may simply be that I slipped the manuscript into an envelope festooned with stamps and addressed to the Rachel Bishop Literary Agency in New York, then left the package outside my door along with a note asking the hotel management to pop it in the nearest mailbox. Are you reading this, Rachel? I love you, sweetheart. You're the greatest agent a has-been ever had. Assuming you find somebody who can decipher my handwriting, feel free to transcribe these pages, give them a title — *The Day of the Lizard*, perhaps, or *Peasants with Torches*, or *Shambling Towards Hiroshima* — and sell the thing to Doubleday for a big, fat advance, col-

lecting your well-earned ten percent. The balance should go to Darlene. Yes, Rachel, I believe you've finally gotten a bestseller out of me, and it arrives bearing the ultimate seal of authenticity, the author's notorious leap into oblivion, at once swan dive and swan song. True, the NSA may attempt to block publication, but when they go to make their case, the judge will laugh them out of court, especially when he hears about the giant fire-breathing bipedal iguanas.

To tell you the truth, Rachel, I've been dropping hints about the Knickerbocker Project behemoths for over four years now, mostly to my devotees — that is, to admirers of Kha-Ton-Ra the living mummy, Corpuscula the alchemical creature, and Gorgantis, King of the Lizards. The kids aren't interested. Instead they want to know how many yards of rotting gauze I wore in *Curse of Kha-Ton-Ra*. (One hundred fifty, as a matter of fact.) Did I play both roles in *Corpuscula Meets the Doppelgänger*? (Of course I did, O ye of little fanaticism.) Did I really write the script for *Gorgantis the Invincible* under the pseudonym Akira Fukiji? (Not only that, I wrote *Gorgantis Unchained* as Kihachi Ifukabe and *Gorgantis vs. Octopocalypse* as Minoru Natsuke.) By now the fans realize that, sooner or later, I'll manage to bring up my obsession with Überweapons — biological, atomic, and otherwise. They tolerate this tic of mine, but barely. History holds no fascination for them. The politics of atrocity bores them silly.

A Martian would be within his rights to ask why I'm in such low spirits this morning. After all, last night the Wonderama Fantasy Film Convention presented me with a major award, the

Raydo, a name meant to evoke not only the rhedosaurus, that ersatz dinosaur featured in *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, but also the two Rays without whom the movie wouldn't exist — Bradbury, author of the original story, and Harryhausen, stop-motion animator extraordinaire. Were my hypothetical Martian to drop by Room 2014 right now, I would explain that on our planet winning a pewter trophy doesn't feel nearly as good as bottomless despair feels bad.

In my view it's boorish to complain about banquet food, so let me go on record as saying that the chicken croquettes and bean salad at the Wonderama Awards dinner were scrumptious. Predictably enough, everybody squirmed during my acceptance speech — as usual, I railed against the thermonuclear arsenals into whose maw our civilization may soon disappear — and the applause was understandably tepid. Feeling at once piqued and chagrined, I slipped away before the next event, a raffle for a credible facsimile of my Gorgantis suit, which the Wonderama staff evidently got for a steal after the National Science Fiction Museum in Denver went bust.

My Raydo statuette is a rather handsome artifact, featuring not only a skillful reproduction of the rhedosaurus in all his dorsal-plated glory, but also the Maine lighthouse he destroys halfway through the picture. The inscription is eloquent and contains only one error. *Syms K. Thorley, Lifetime Achievement Award, Baltimore Imagi-Movies Society, 1984*. My made-up middle initial is *J*. Where did they get that *K*? I hope they weren't thinking of my eternal nemesis, the egregious Siegfried K. Dagover. That would be the unkindest typo of all.

Today my Raydo will function as a paperweight, securing each successive page after I've torn it, littered with my scribbles, from the legal pad. I'm equipped with thirty such virgin tablets, and I've laid in other essentials, too. A box of Bic pens, a carton of filter-tipped Camels, a jar of Maxwell House instant coffee with a submersible heating coil, two pastrami sandwiches from room service, a liter of amontillado in a novelty cut-glass decanter. This is Edgar Allan Poe's city, after all, and I've decided to pay him homage. Pardon me while I take a few sips of sherry — yes, it's decadent to drink before noon, but Poe's hovering shade expects me to follow protocol — and then I'll begin my tale.

At the moment I'm writing from the slough of despond, but my mood was exultant and my career in full flower when the two FBI agents showed up on the Monogram Pictures sound stage to assess the caliber of my patriotism. We'd just finished a productive morning's shoot on *Revenge of Corpuscula* for dear old Sam Katzman and his noble little studio, William Beaudine directing, Mack Stengler lensing, Dave Milton providing his usual bricks-without-straw décor. The screenplay credit would go to Darlene, though I contributed six good lines and two nifty plot twists during a furious forty-eight-hour rewrite session in our Santa Monica bungalow. Darlene and I had been shacking up ever since falling head-over-heels on the set of the original *Corpuscula*, which she wrote on a dare from her best friend, Brenda Weisberg, the only woman in Hollywood routinely churning out horror movie scripts. (Brenda's

masterpiece is probably *The Mad Ghoul* of '43, though many fans swear by *The Mummy's Ghost* of two years later.) Oddly enough, Darlene's script was exactly what Sam had been looking for, and when the picture performed better than expected, he signed her to a six-year exclusive contract, an interval during which she was obligated to rewrite every crappy Bob Steele western and East Side Kids vehicle that landed on her desk, plus a gaggle of *Corpuscula* sequels.

Like the first three films in the cycle, all conspicuously profitable despite the constraints imposed by Monogram's accountants and the Second World War, *Revenge of Corpuscula* paired me with Siegfried K. Dagover, the latter playing Dr. Woltan Werdistratus to my hulking but articulate brute, *Corpuscula*. Darlene's ingenious variation on the Frankenstein myth had Werdistratus eschewing a mad scientist's normal method of creating artificial life: zapping a rag-doll assemblage of pilfered body parts with electricity. Instead, her insane doctor unearthed a human skeleton, using it as the matrix around which various organs, muscles, ligaments, vessels, and ducts coalesced by means of — and here Darlene was exploiting a motif from Mary Shelley's original novel — alchemical procedures pioneered by Paracelsus and his fellow adepts. About five years ago the master's theses started appearing, bearing titles like "Hollywood's Challenge to Empiricism's Hegemony: Magic and Medicine in the *Corpuscula* Cycle." You think I'm kidding.

We'd gotten it in the can, by God, the three most difficult pages in Darlene's script, *Corpuscula* threatening to hand Dr.

Werdistratus over to the authorities unless the two of them reach an understanding. If you've seen the picture, you remember the routine, the alchemical monster strapping his creator to a torture rack in the dungeon laboratory, then confronting him with a cavalcade of pickled brains, each belonging to a recently deceased genius, the monster's aim being for Werdistratus to fuse them into a supercerebrum and graft it onto Corpuscula's cortex, thereby transforming him from outcast to intellectual giant. As usual, Dagover tried to hijack the scene, and as usual I didn't let him. He wasn't a terrible actor, but he had only two personae: neurasthenic connoisseur of the dark arts, and deranged desecrator of God's designs. I could act him under the table with a paper bag over my head and a clothespin on my tongue.

Beyond our successful rendering of the torture rack scene, I had other reasons to be jubilant. The previous morning, Darlene's pregnancy test had come back negative. Two days earlier, Germany had surrendered unconditionally to the Allies. And to top it off, at the beginning of the week I'd finished my first serious attempt at screenwriting. In my opinion *Lycanthropus* was so scary it made Siodmak's script for *The Wolf Man* seem like a bedtime story for depressive children, though I wouldn't be truly pleased with my achievement until Darlene told me it was swell.

With Beaudine's blessing Dudley the AD decreed a lunch break, saying he wanted everybody back at 1:30 P.M. sharp on stage two for the big cemetery scene — Werdistratus and his warpie assistant, Klogr, skulking among the graves with

spades, prospecting for carrion — and then the pair of G-Men came striding across the laboratory set, hopscotching among the cables and gobo stands, outfitted in genuine Lamont Cranston slouch hats and *misterioso* sunglasses. At first I thought they were actors themselves, headed for the nearest exit after appearing in some dopey spy thriller on stage three, but when they brushed up against me, tugged on my sheepskin doublet, and hustled me into a fretwork of *film noir* shadows, I realized they had something else in mind. They introduced themselves as Agent Jones and Agent Brown — their real names, I later learned, though at the time I didn't believe them. The grilling began instantly, before I could remove a shred of makeup. Corpuscula gave them no pause, despite the third eye embedded in his cheek and the herniated brain emerging from his fractured skull. I figured such *sang-froid* was habitual for guys in their line. The rest of the day would probably find them coolly quizzing a bank robber as he lay expiring of gunshot wounds or calmly questioning a naked whore who'd just disemboweled a john in self-defense. A tattered ambulatory cadaver was nothing.

Agent Brown, a lardish man with a pencil-thin moustache, asked me if I was in fact “a Jew named Isaac Margolis who now calls himself Syms Thorley.”

“Isaac was the name of a great uncle who died before I was born,” I said, chattering nervously. I was convinced they'd come to arrest me as a draft dodger, even though I had a legitimate medical deferment. “It's a Jewish custom. You want to know anything else about my people, talk to Louis B. Mayer.

Being a Jew is not my area of expertise.”

“Ah, so you’re *assimilated*,” said Agent Jones with an anti-Semitic curl of his lip. He had tiny eyes, bad teeth, and the negligible nose of an altar-boy Pinocchio.

“My *bubbe* keeps trying to make me observant,” I said, “but all I really care about is the movies.”

“That fits with the data we’ve collected so far,” Agent Brown said.

“Did my draft board send you here?” I asked. “I’m classified 1-M.”

“We know all about your flat feet,” Agent Jones said. “A mighty fortunate handicap, if you ask me.”

“We also know about last summer’s appendectomy and your girlfriend’s pregnancy test,” Agent Brown said.

“Here’s the deal, Thorley,” Agent Jones said. “Your Uncle Isaac might be dead, but your Uncle Sam is alive and kicking, and he’s got a special assignment for you, something any red-blooded, stouthearted, flat-footed American would be keen to take on.”

Just then Dagover strolled by, still in character, the wild-eyed Werdistratus, obviously hoping I’d gotten in trouble and eager to overhear the details.

“We need to take this conversation elsewhere,” Agent Brown said, casting a suspicious eye on the mad scientist.

“I’m afraid Monogram doesn’t have a commissary, but there’s a swell little Mexican place on the corner of Sunset and Talmadge,” I said.

“The Neon Cactus,” Agent Jones said, nodding.



“We’ve reserved a booth,” Agent Brown said.

“Hey, Dudley,” I called to the AD, “Eliot Ness and his transvestite sister are taking me out to lunch. I’m done for the day, right?”

Dudley flipped open his brass-handled board. “No more *Corpuscula* scenes this afternoon, but we need you in your makeup for an 8:00 A.M. take one. Do me a favor and be at the studio by six.”

“Here’s an idea,” I told Dudley. “Have Carl come out to my house at dawn tomorrow and put the makeup on me while I’m still asleep.”

“I hate this job,” Dudley said.

“A bewildered Syms Thorley and his new friends set off for the Neon Cactus, in quest of whatever’s on tap,” I said, flashing the AD a florid *Corpuscula* grin. “Fade-out.”

What they had on tap was *Dos Equis*, which the G-Men and I supplemented with outsized orders of tacos and *gaspacho*. Actors and soldiers jammed the place to the walls. A lively lass with a pretty face and a considerable figure brought us our food. The cliché is true now, and it was true then: L.A. has the most nubile waitresses in the world, hopeful starlets anticipating the proper cosmic conjunction of a cruising producer and a flattering sunbeam.

My makeup was itching, so I tugged at the latex appliance, pulling a huge swatch from my forehead along with my fright wig, then set the hairy puddle beside me on the bench. I removed my third eye and the dentures, resting them atop the

napkin dispenser. My behavior attracted no attention. This was Hollywood. In the next booth over, the Abominable Snowman drank a vanilla milkshake through a straw. Napoleon sat at the counter, munching on a doughnut. Beside the swinging doors to the kitchen, Julius Caesar was propositioning our waitress.

“Uncle Sam doesn’t want you in uniform, but he *does* want you in a suit,” Agent Jones told me.

“A clown suit?” I said. “I’m supposed to tour the Pacific with the USO, cheering up the troops? I don’t do clowns, only monsters.”

“That’s exactly the idea,” Agent Brown said. “Uncle Sam wants you in a monster suit. Nick and I have to decide if you’re a security risk. We’re also supposed to soften you up.”

“With your fists?”

“With the news that the assignment pays ten thousand dollars.”

“Ten thousand? Jeez.”

“Personally, I think you should do it out of sheer bare-assed patriotism,” Agent Jones said, “especially since you’re so assimilated and everything.”

“To tell you the truth, we were thinking of recommending your co-star Dagover, but the Navy seems to think you’re the better actor,” Agent Brown said.

“The Navy knows what they’re talking about,” I said.

Let me take this opportunity to set the record straight. There was no rivalry between Siggy Dagover and myself. There was, rather, an unimaginably vicious vendetta that stopped short of

homicide only because in Hollywood there are more imaginative ways to settle scores. Think of Joan Crawford versus Bette Davis, and you'll have some idea of the scale involved.

The only thing I admired about Dagover was his ambition. Hired by Göttingen University as a linguistics professor way back in '34, he became the first Gentile intellectual on his block to flee Hitler. Landing in Manhattan as the Great Depression was reaching its nadir, he briefly supported himself by washing windows and scrubbing floors for the few remaining plutocrats in New York, then hopped a series of freight trains for the coast, determined to bluster his way into the movies.

"Any Japs up your family tree?" Agent Jones asked me abruptly.

"Only moneylenders, bagelmakers, and rabbis," I said, not really expecting a laugh. Humor was never the strong suit of anti-Semites, except when T. S. Eliot wrote about cats.

"That accords with our findings," Agent Jones said.

"What associations does the name Karl Marx bring to mind?" Agent Brown asked.

"I believe he stayed in New York with Gummo when the others went out West," I said.

"Are you prepared to sign a loyalty oath?" Agent Brown asked.

"To which country?" I asked.

"I have infinite patience," Agent Jones said. "I really do. My patience goes from here to the goddamn moon."

"This woman you're living with, Darlene Wasserman, did you know her parents once belonged to the Communist

League?" Agent Brown asked. "Your girlfriend was a red-diaper baby."

"I thought we were fighting Hirohito this week, not Stalin."

"Tell me about Miss Wasserman's politics."

"She voted for Roosevelt, just like everybody else," I said.

"What about you?" Agent Jones said.

"If I ever run for president, I'm sure Darlene will vote for me."

"Did you vote for Roosevelt?"

"I don't remember."

"According to our investigations, you and Miss Wasserman are registered Democrats."

"That's completely correct. Our diapers are as white as yours, Nick."

"One more crack, Jew-boy, and the job goes to Dagover," Agent Jones said.

"Why does Uncle Sam want me in a monster suit?" I asked.

"We can't tell you that," Agent Brown said.

"Because you aren't allowed, because you don't know, or because you despise me?" I asked.

"We can't tell you that either," Agent Brown said.

"Actually, I'd be happy to address your third question," Agent Jones said.

Agent Brown passed me a slip of paper bearing the words *4091 East Olympic Boulevard, Room 101, 0900 Hours*. "Show up at this address tomorrow morning, nine o'clock sharp."

"With my monster makeup on, or without it?" I asked, removing the fake eye from the napkin dispenser. Dudley would

be miserable about this latest hitch in the schedule, but that was the price you paid for trying to make horror movies during a global conflagration.

“Tell them you’re the actor, come to see Commander Quimby,” Agent Jones said.

“Bombs over Tokyo,” I said, nonchalantly dropping my glass orb into the G-Man’s gazpacho. “Look, Nick, there’s an eye in your soup. If you don’t make a big deal about it, I’m sure they’ll bring you a fresh bowl.”

That night I made a pot of spaghetti for Darlene and myself, then read her the first draft of *Lycanthropus*, insisting that she should feel perfectly free to give me her frank professional opinion leavened with unqualified adulation. Three or four lines went clunk, and for budget purposes I’d probably have to cut the prologue set in ancient Rome, but basically I had to agree with her when she said the thing was a whiz-bang, gosh-wow masterpiece.

“It’s too good for Katzman,” she elaborated, puffing on a postprandial Chesterfield. She was the sort of creature a down-market writer might describe as “a mere slip of a girl,” though I found her ethereality wholly sensual and paradoxically carnal. “You’ve got to peddle it to Warners or Universal.”

“Universal would let me keep ancient Rome,” I said.

“You know what you’ve got here, Syms? A goddamn series, that’s what. *Curse of Lycanthropus*, *Chutzpah of Lycanthropus*, *Boston Blackie Meets Lycanthropus* — it’s all sewn up.”

I thought she was being too optimistic, but I would say one

thing for my script: whatever its flaws, I doubted that anybody had treated werewolfery in quite this way before. Unlike Henry Hull's neurotic Dr. Glendon or Lon Chaney, Jr.'s self-pitying Larry Talbot, my aristocratic scientist Baron Basil Ordlust actually *wanted* to be a shapeshifter. Convinced that lycanthropy offers the ultimate thrill, promising the one perversion that could sate his rarefied appetites, Ordlust travels the world seeking carriers of the supreme lupine curse — might he find the quintessential beast in Rumania? Russia? Cambodia? Tibet? Brazil? — soliciting these princely werewolves to plant their teeth judiciously in his flesh. Although most of the infections take hold, the subsequent transformations always fall short of Ordlust's expectations, so he blithely cures himself and hits the road once again, still seeking the ultimate in mephistophelean saliva. And to top it off, Ordlust is a *sympathetic* character.

A word about the culture of Hollywood horror actors, circa 1945. You might be surprised to learn that our proud little fraternity had no particular affection for hideous makeup, even though deformity was the *sine qua non* of the genre. Sure, I suppose the elder Lon Chaney reveled in his masochistic man-of-a-thousand-faces mystique, but the rest of us had other agendas. Fanged dentures, itinerant eyeballs, gaping nostrils, rubber humps on your back, stitches the size of football laces on your forehead — not only were such appliances painful, they tended to cramp your performance. If you couldn't arrange to get cast as a vampire or a psychopath, you at least wanted a character who oscillated between a mute monster and a loqua-

cious man. That's why the werewolf was such a coveted role within my profession. The fuzzy discomfort would be over in three or four shooting days, and then you'd get to deliver lots of dialogue, usually the best lines in the script. Mummies were a dicier proposition. Karloff famously had it both ways when he played Im-Ho-Tep back in '32. He's trussed up in those damn bandages for only about three minutes of screen time, first in the great resurrection scene, then briefly during the lavish flashbacks set in ancient Egypt. For most of the picture he's Ardeth Bey, unraveled mummy, a bit dry to the touch but smoothly lipping his way through one tasty line after another. I enjoyed no such luck with the Kha-Ton-Ra cycle. The scripts had me embalmed in every shot, though I got to do some pretty adept pantomime in *Bride of Kha-Ton-Ra* and *Ghost of Kha-Ton-Ra*. So *Lycanthropus* was a dream project for me, seventy-two discrete speeches ranging from pseudo-Shakespear-ean bombast to Oscar Wildean epigrams.

At first Darlene wanted to accompany me to Commander Quimby's lair, but then I explained how touchy my prospective employers were about national security, and why showing up with the spawn of Trotskyites on my arm might throw the Navy for a loop.

"My red diapers are behind me," she said, deadpan. In those days, even when Darlene's jokes weren't funny, I laughed.

"How's this for a deal?" I said. "Stay home today, but if Uncle Sam needs a rewrite on this mysterious script of his, I'll try to get you the job."

Appeased, Darlene promised to spend the morning orna-

menting *Lycanthropus* with constructive criticism, then sent me off with a hug and a kiss.

4091 East Olympic Boulevard proved to be a nondescript one-storey sandstone building of the sort you drive blithely by every day, knowing it's full of paper-pushers and clock-watchers, and nobody's in there writing a symphony or taming a lion or having an orgasm. I parked around the corner, availed myself of the side entrance, and strolled into Room 101, its door framing a pane of frosted glass stenciled with the words *New Amsterdam Project, Los Angeles Office, No Admittance*. A buxom brunette in a WAVES uniform stepped out from behind the counter, a little plaque reading *Lt. Percy* pinned on her left ja-lookie. Learning that I was the expected movie star, she guided me down a stairwell, through a door marked *Interrogation Room*, and into the august presence of Commander Quimby, a gaunt officer in dress blues and a frothy auburn toupee that surmounted his cranium like a thatched roof.

I saluted. Quimby frowned, evidently wondering if I might be mocking him. I was wondering the same thing.

"I'll put my cards on the table, Thorley," he said as Lieutenant Percy slipped away. "The FBI thinks you're a smart-aleck, and they told us that Karloff, Dagover, or even Lorre might work out better."

"Peter could never get a security clearance," I said. "He's a double risk — born a Kraut, and before the war he played Mr. Moto."

"I just got off the phone with the State Department. Jimmy