

Prelude to Victor's Square*

On Ron's book reviews—the first, 1953, and what was then (itself *Back in the Day*) the latest book review (ten years ago next month)—on master crime writer Jack Olsen's **acclaimed "Hastened to the Grave: The Gypsy Murder Investigation,"** St. Martin's Press.

CompuServe message:

To: Jack Olsen 5/10/98 4:18 a.m.

Ah, Jack

I still remember the first book review I wrote. The novel was *Iron Baby Angel*. The review ran in the old *Herald Express* in Los Angeles in the early 1950s, when Aggie was there with the baseball bat on her desk, in the days when we used to rewrite the razored clippings—I'd do some of the razoring—from the morning *Examiner*, sometimes doublecheck the spelling against the *Times*, and that was a good part of the morning edition; that and of course the lost dog pictures and the like.

Anyway, I wrote a review on a book about life in Kentucky, then showed it to a few of the old timers, some of the more disgruntled ones, including Don Ryan, who was from Kentucky, a nice guy even if he never did wear socks, and the next thing I knew these guys were practically splitting a gut laughing at me as if this just had to be one of the dumbest book reviews of all time.

Gene Coughlin, a nationally recognized journalist who had a good twenty or thirty years experience on me used to say, "I'm not fast, but I'm shifty!" and if he'd had quite a few more than one too many, he'd do his "Dipsy Doodle" like he was getting ready for a big pitch.

I was too young to know many special moves, and all I could do at that stage was work hard. I knew I was green but I stayed up half the night reading and writing and rewriting and rewriting and finally put together some three hundred words that I thought—at least hoped—were not too badly written. But just to make sure the review was okay before turning it in, I'd asked Ryan and Tom Lennon and Coughlin to take a look.

As if that wasn't dumb enough, I even admitted that I liked the book and thought it readable—which told them right off, of course, that I'd actually read it.

Finally, one of them admitted to me what they were laughing about. Talk about being a newbie! "A real pro," one of them finally pointed out, "would have written the review from the dust jacket."

Posted in Writers Forum, CompuServe

To: Ron Kenner, 102046,363 5/10/98
From: Sandra Parshall/SL4, 110420,2423
[Section Leader4]

<Finally, one of them admitted to me what they were laughing about. Talk about being a newbie! A real pro, they pointed out, would have written the review from the dust jacket.>

LOL! [Laughing Out Loud] Great story, like all your stories.

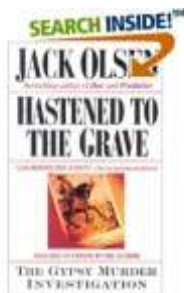
Sandy
SL4/Mystery Writers

About Victor's Square

Traveling in Los Angeles on the Boulevard — to the Sunset Strip and back to Hollywood — Ron takes us on a circuitous route to Victor's Square. Dealing with "Uncharmed particles" and the "curious balance of the universe," we come eventually to the highly acclaimed "don't miss" book:

HASTENED TO THE GRAVE

The Gypsy Murder Investigation
By Jack Olsen



Dedicated by Ron to Jack Olsen, Sandra Parshall, Karen Pershing, and Ilsa Barber, for their encouragement on Victor's Square when first posted with Olsen's "Expert of the Month" string in CompuServe's Writers Forum (Since changed to Books and Writers Community).

VICTOR'S SQUARE—A LITERARY TRIPTYCH*

(A three parter that turned into fifteen.)

By Ron Kenner

To Jack Olsen (author, *Hastened to the Grave*):

5/18/98—Jack, I have a literary triptych to offer up and you're in it, mostly in the third part, but I'll try not to kill you with the suspense and will try to push along with reasonable rapidity, ha ha, to part three, about the definite adventure I had yesterday with "Hastened to the Grave."

If you're simply too excited and can't wait for the "hot stuff" — the part about my critical response to your book — I can tell you now, from just getting into it, that it's off to a highly polished, very fine start. A terrific depiction of the character, Fay, a literal fun read — not always easy when you're talking about real murder — and a great sense of immediacy in the story; no small accomplishment, I might add, for any book that is something more than a novel.

In such work, as I've learned and know well from personal and sometimes painful and exhausting experience, one can't just imaginatively create certain shaped pieces as needed (as, say, one might do in a novel); you have to hunt through history and traipse over a seemingly endless multitude of pieces of all shapes until you can "find" what you're looking for. Then you can shave it a little bit, build around it, reshape it—but it's still history; and not just history, as in "gone," or as in "a bag of tricks played against the dead," as Voltaire once put it, but a kind of real history in the making!

So congrats, so far, anyway, and I hope that offers sufficient nourishment to hold you through the prelude, and the first two parts of the triptych itself, at Victor Square, if you want or perhaps even know the setting, in the Hollywood Hills are just north of Franklin (not that far from Mary's and my place a little farther west just as you move up into the Hollywood Hills).

As I may have mentioned, Mary and I are moving up, since our condo (where we've been for a half dozen years now) is maybe a couple hundred yards up the hill (perhaps it even moved up an inch or two more in the last quake).

I may also have mentioned that Mary and I are late people. She works an afternoon shift as a medical technologist--nowadays it's called laboratory scientist—in the laboratory at Childrens Hospital in Los Angeles. The "Childrens" part is engraved in limestone or whatever, and on the letterheads, with the addition of the "s"—hospital management explains that the *childrens* is not "by" the children but "for" the children—and without the apostrophe, but either way it's still a nice place (if you don't mind hospitals) and recently was voted once again (by several thousand doctors in a *US News and World Report* survey) as the best hospital in the west, for children, and as being among the top four pediatric hospitals in the nation.

I'm fairly certain that this fine non-profit hospital's increasingly privatized, pre-cut, pre-packaged and higher-priced cafeteria is not now among the top four hospital cafeterias in the nation. Well, it's hardly what it used to be before modern society became so much more efficient; but of course I've seen worse and you can't have everything, can you?

Anyway this brief intro is the prelude for noting that Mary, in the hospital lab, does the really important stuff in the family while I, the writer (ask Sandy Reuscher to tell you the story I passed on about well-esteemed "writers and riders")* adjust myself to Mary's schedule, do some writing in my home office, as best I can; and sometimes, as when I'm running errands, have little adventures such as was the case yesterday in the scene with "Hastened to the Grave."

Usually I simply try hard to stay out of trouble. By that I mean, mostly I try not to lose either my wallet or check book or hat or sunglasses or pen or spare pen (in case one dries out) or reading glasses, keys, handkerchief. . . .

There were some interesting chat comments I read most recently where one CompuServer was talking about how she liked to write in the buff, saving on clothing expenses and taking advantage of one of the few perks of being a writer. Someone immediately flashed back—that is, responded quickly—and asked if she had considered applying for a job as a clerk at the White House. A great response, of course, but you can see where the dress idea might have some merit. Personally I could probably write in the buff, but never without my shoes on. Maybe it's a guy thing!

So I've read a few things about how to dress while writing, how to set up your office to be comfortable while writing, and so on, but have seen relatively little about making the best selection of reading so as to fit a particular setting, or, as in the case of my recent adventure with "Hastened to the Grave," the

arrangement of the most suitable setting to fit the reading. But let me not wander prematurely into the latter part of this literary triptych.

As for staying out of trouble and not losing things, it's relevant to mention here that I especially try not to leave behind any of the print material I often cart around in the back seat so as to have suitable reading for most any occasion. This includes the small-sized pocket book (that fits into your pocket) for when you're waiting in line at the bank, the post office, or maybe waiting at the doctor's office; the *LA Times* Op-Ed section or *NY Times Book Review*, or *NYT Week in Review* or *New York Review of Books*, for when there's a table to spread out on; light reading for some place that's a little noisy, or more serious reading if I feel up to it and the occasion allows. So maybe there's an unread *Mother Jones* if one recently arrived in the mail; or, if the *Harpers* had just arrived there'd be another insightful Lewis Lapham column I could read while waiting in the car to pick up Mary; or the *Harper's* "index" with which to once again (with or without request) test my barber Fred's groaning impatience (when he missed by a wide margin) or great glee (whenever he came close to the right number or percentage point).

Admittedly I hesitate to take hardbounds out of the house, especially marked up or important stuff, for fear of losing this; but sometimes I'll also cart around in the back seat maybe one or two easily replaceable hardbounds (offering a better choice of reading to fit my mood) and of course there's usually whatever I happened to be reading at the time. You never know when the opportunity for reading would arise and so I'd go through this elaborate ritual of collecting and carting reading material (something like the half dozen books I sometimes cart to bed at night before conking off in fifteen minutes) even if I'm planning to only take Mary the two miles to work and then return home.

Add all that literature to my weighty thoughts while going through perfunctory motions and it can be a fair load to carry, of course. Some sense of that weight had been nicely captured, I thought, if a little melodramatically, in the line of poetry: "The world is so large to live in." I think that was also the title of the poem, written by an old friend, Davie Meltzer, when he was young — the fellow who years ago once put his head completely through what had been a small tear in the top of my brother Jim's old Ford convertible, just to see what would happen, and whose poetry book I still have though Davie himself disappeared somewhere around the City Lights bookstore in San Francisco, the same area in North Beach, as I recall, where someone initiated the first topless shoe shine establishment.

Well that was my usual reading stash, not hardly as weighty as the twenty six pounds of paraphernalia the uniformed cops clip on—flashlight, gun, ticket book, baton, keys, etc.—but we all have our loads to carry, right? Except

for yesterday, because yesterday, one of the first such days in many weeks, I ventured out of the house with no reading material. Cold turkey!

I'm not agoraphobic or anything like that, but I do tend to get nervous without a book or something in print to hang onto. And I mention all this, of course, to suggest the depth of sacrifice (sans reading material) but knowing I'd soon get a hold of a copy of Jack's *Hastened to the Grave* (I'd called ahead) and no less confident (though I hadn't made up my mind where to stop for some kind of snack) that Jack's book would be suitable for most any reading occasion.

NEXT: ON THE BOULEVARD

VICTOR'S SQUARE—Part 2

ON THE BOULEVARD & THE SUNSET STRIP

By Ron Kenner

To: Jack Olsen (author: *Hastened to the Grave*)

5/19/18—After dropping Mary off and getting my kiss, I completed the U in front of the horseshoe that once had served as the ready-made set for the entrance to “The Young Interns.” The show had long been off the tube but you may remember it as the one with the three (young interns) running out of the front door, kind of stupidly and yet with great fervor as though maybe it had been a long day’s work and, as author Stanley Elkin once said, “Enough is enough.”

This whole area has been sprinkled over the years with movie activity, with impressive film stuff even as you moved eastward away from Hollywood. A short block east from where I always dropped Mary off at the hospital, Sunset and Hollywood Boulevards angle together, Hollywood becoming a narrow residential street at that point and Sunset swinging back and out into its own, the same cross street becoming Hillhurst north of Sunset and Virgil on the south.

A little further down on Sunset on the south side and not far from the huge yet unobtrusive warehouse (where you might shop for stuff to make up a movie set) is the club El Cid, once the Ranch House and a brief background set for D.W. Griffith’s “Birth of a Nation,” often described as the first major full length dramatic feature film [and less often described, but all-too-accurately enough, as something of a racist film]. If that historical change from the silent movies was little known to tourists, it didn’t keep them from packing the place for the evening flamenco dancing and for those electric sounds that seemed to me quite enough to burst your eardrums. I’d enjoyed watching the dancing on

a few occasions, before they really pumped up the sound, but now, even though it still had a charming look to it, with the steep spiral stairway entrance taking you down below the Sunset overpass, you couldn't get me near the place.

On passing by I'd sometimes be reminded of the cops, one example of the difference sometimes between image and reality, because I knew that the most dangerous job in the police department—the assignment that sometimes HASTENED YOU TO THE GRAVE, the one that brought the most fatalities or injuries—was not Robbery or Homicide or the SWAT team or Metro or some special investigative group but—guess what—the motorcycle division, which over the years has invariably racked up the most fatalities, perhaps more than all the other police sections combined.

Even so, I'd read somewhere that by far the more dangerous job was working on the farm, and despite all of the physical force involved with the police the profession with the most back injuries was not cops but secretaries and writers, apparently always hunching forward and stretching the lower back. So as a writer, too, I figured that even if you weren't a prescient correspondent ala Mel Gibson in Indonesia you could still be proud to be "living dangerously."

Among those less noticeable injuries in our exciting times there was a good chance that over the years a motorcycle cop would develop a hearing problem, too, and many had; and sometimes, passing by El Cid or places like that, you had to wonder whether people working there were slowly going deaf; another example of the little noted subtext of violence, perfect for the movies where the dialogue is often a mere distraction and the subtext everything.

Most of the early film work came not from Hollywood but from the Edendale section, toward Glendale. Closer in, down the street from El Cid and back toward the hospital where Mary worked is the public television station and right behind that the old building that once was Charlie Chaplin's studio. All very interesting and exciting, of course, but the place that really excited me then, I admit, was the quaint looking Swiss bakery that brought a fresh new look to Sunset.



More than that (I realized with great perspicacity) a bakery was the one thing that had been missing in this immediate area during all the time Mary and I had been living nearby in the Silverlake section, the hilly area which for years had hung onto its considerable charm. From our old place on Maltman, about a mile east of the hospital, just a little ways back you looked north down the steep hill lined with the tall palm trees all the way to Sunset. It might not be much in San Francisco but in LA it was one of the steeper hills going, and then from the other side of Sunset it immediately rose again and sometimes, farther in the distance, you'd even see snow capped mountains. Perhaps most

impressive, nowadays, was this particular view on the one or two really clear days a year that would come after a really good rain.

Silverlake, though to a lesser extent in more recent times, had been the kind of unique place where you found something like a real melting pot, with expensive homes and cheaper rentals sometimes side by side. The hilly area still showed some of its considerable charm and appeal, though rents had long ago started going up and no doubt there were fewer artists and writers and so-called “creative people,” the ones who liked the area partly for the cheaper rent but also for the hills and because for years it had been one of the few places in the city where the subdividers couldn’t easily—or at least not cheaply—move in and build look-alike apartment units.

As you’d expect, the technology eventually caught up and the area had taken on a little more sameness, the more modern apartment buildings coming in at the higher levels. In much (if not most) of Latin America the poor people live up in the hills. Curiously, on Sunset Boulevard itself, for miles the whole area took on a Mexican and then, later, Latino look, kind of colorful and ragged, you might say and with many small mom and pop stores (more typically Caucasian owned) servicing the heavily Spanish-speaking population. At least it seemed that way unless, of course, one realized that since fewer Latinos owned cars their residency typically extended only a few hundred yards up the steeply climbing hills, if that. So this stretch of Sunset seemed almost the *opposite* of a Potemkin Village. Maybe that had been changing some, over the years, but in either case (though you might get pan dulce on Sunset) I knew there’d been no major bakery—surely no decent bagels unless you traveled to the Brooklyn Bagel Factory farther south, over by Alvarado and halfway downtown.

I was thrilled and I told Mary, all excited as I came to lunch one day at the hospital. I mentioned that I’d only gotten that quick glance driving by but it looked really great, a charming Swiss bakery that had opened not many blocks down on Sunset from the hospital. After that I told her I’d made all that up to entertain her, but she would never let me—the great reporter and observer (and connoisseur of cookies)—forget it, because on the way home that afternoon I discovered that what I’d thought was a sparkling new Swiss bakery was actually a cardboard movie front with the more permanent body and fender shop sitting there directly beyond the flimsy front that’s probably still there now, for all I recall, as though in some kind of real Potemkin Village though only for a relatively few feet.

So the bakery was never there. Many of the bookstores were gone, too. For years just down from that “almost bakery” was the Crown bookstore on Sunset, a little east of Virgil, with the hospital itself a few blocks to the west and stretching to Vermont. But the Crown chain was supposedly in trouble now and so you could say that at least this store, where I might have gone to pick

up Jack's book, had been HASTENED TO THE GRAVE. Of course that wasn't as depressing as some other changeovers.

Years back when I first attended classes at Los Angeles City College, not too far down from the hospital, there were two fine bookstores on that one block alone on Vermont, directly across from the campus. Now one of those bookstores had been turned into a games arcade and the other into a pool hall, both long ago HASTENED TO THE GRAVE.

NEXT: Recollections of Pepe the poodle, en route to Book Soup

VICTOR'S SQUARE—Part 3

Recollections of Pepe, en route to Book Soup

By Ron Kenner

To: Jack Olsen (author, *Hastened to the Grave*):

5/19/98—There was a small library nearby where I'd drop off Mary at the hospital for work and of course the beautifully remodeled library downtown, if you felt up to fighting the traffic coming and going. They'd spent some \$214 million dollars and did a fine job on the remodeling, I thought, but so far as I knew they hadn't added 214 books from that expenditure and meanwhile libraries throughout the city and county had been laying off (or early retiring) workers and running on shorter hours and fewer days. (Los Angeles wasn't alone that way, of course.)

There was a figure given, years back, that Los Angeles, though second in population had been 22nd in per capita library spending. It wasn't so much that we were "backward," we were just too damn spread out and there had always been too little tax base; though more and more we'd been filling in, until now there were some thirteen or fourteen million people within a sixty mile radius of downtown; a good number of them, of course, having come out for the wide open spaces (ha ha), the freedom and frustrations of an auto city.

Almost certainly the downtown library had some of Jack's books, I figured, but, given the library's book buying budget I didn't want to count on them having the latest one. Besides, I wanted a copy and expected Jack to sign it, maybe with a drop of blood! Dave Meltzter, I remembered, supposedly had signed each of his five hundred poetry books with a drop of blood.



A few years back I'd been listed in the *Marquis Who's Who in the West*—they kept giving me a better and better listing (as my career went nowhere fast, my resume was getting better and better). I figured that whoever was who at Who's Who was probably hoping I'd buy a copy, to judge from all the literature they sent on; and by now I was near certain that if I finally bought a copy they'd figure they'd made their investment and kick me out. Besides, the book

was so expensive I was afraid to tell my mother, knowing she'd have to have one, or more even, and the cost was so much now they didn't even carry that volume—or they bought one every other time now—in the downtown library.

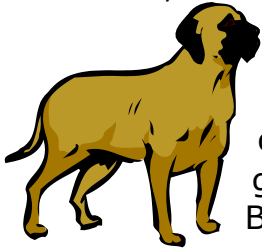
I finally had to go to Pasadena just to check it out, though I later learned they could have faxed me the page for six dollars. The downtown LA library used to carry several books of mine, I was pleased to recall, but then they had the massive fire and apparently I'd been consigned to ashes. The titles still came up on the computer but I still wasn't able to find them on the shelves.

There was Aldine bookstore around the corner from where I'd drop off Mary and then frequently stop, but they had a small selection of new books and I certainly wasn't going to wait any longer for the opportunity to get *HASTENED TO THE GRAVE*. Another bookstore nearby, Skylight Books, had recently reopened with new ownership (following a long hiatus after the prior bookstore closed). Skylight was a little ways north on Vermont, but in-between they had all the subway construction going on. By coincidence I was still getting over the dust from a tour during the past week of a subway construction work site eighty feet below, near Universal Studios; my bronchitis had started kicking up, and instinctively, almost without thinking, I hesitated to take that route to the bookstore on Vermont.

It had taken me awhile to figure things out. I can be slow sometimes, but I finally drove out from the loop in front of the Childrens Hospital without running over any young interns, headed west down Sunset on a lovely, if cool, day in May, the windows open in my old Cad and the sun roof opened just a crack, enough to let some air in but not enough to let the sun find me and drill a painful narrow beam into my clever but sensitive bald head.

Traffic wasn't what it used to be when I first came to California in 1948, but I was learning patience and actually, in mid-afternoon, I knew it probably wouldn't take long to get back into Hollywood, proper, then through West Hollywood, then Los Angeles or County territory (almost no one seemed to know which with any certainty) and out to the *Strip*. On the way, part of my run, I could, as promised, pick up my repaired and upgraded computer in Henry's place — the Computer Wiz — for our friend Gordon Keith now living out at the beach.

A block away from the Computer Wiz, I had stayed for awhile (many years back) on Fuller Street., practically across the street from what had been Ralphs Market. Lately, Ralphs had been buying up everything in sight. They had the new store a little further south by Fountain and La Brea and in effect had cornered the market and no longer needed one on Fuller; so the store was in the process of being dismantled. [at least for the time being]. That had been the most convenient market for Mary and I since we'd moved into Hollywood. Now that was gone but I still had my memories, right?



I'd been living there nearby on Fuller with *Jerry Bixby* and his wife, Linda, and their dog, Pepe, the almost-always barking macho French poodle (the one who later, up in the San Bernardino mountains, was always trying to hump the Mastiff). So there had been the three of us on Fuller and then an occasional writer (or aspiring writer/actor like M—) coming and going in that old 1930s bungalow, not far from the place where Bixby used to stay—a kind of large boarding house with various add-ons and extensions—that he liked to call *Tarantula Arms*. The one on Fuller wasn't a palace but obviously was an improvement over *Tarantula arms*.

Passing by I couldn't help but think about those days. Bixby, who later was to create the original story for the film *Fantastic Voyage*, before 20th Century Fox screwed it up,** had died only days earlier, following a quadruple heart bypass and thousands of packs of cigarettes over the years.

When I'd stayed there with Jerry and Linda, I'd just gotten out of the Army and we were all living off my unemployment check and whatever else we could sell through our agent, Forest Ackerman, later (or already well underway) to become known as Mr. Science Fiction.

We'd been struggling but there had been some great moments if you didn't mind the early morning crowing of the roosters too much. Linda used to talk about how those damn roosters always followed her, every place she moved to even in urban LA in the 1960s. Thus, even excluding the recent death of Jerry, in all the years that followed since my brief respite (a kind of recuperation from the Army), I hardly ever drove down Sunset past Fuller without at least thinking, briefly, unstated but still there somehow, about Pepe, one of Hollywood's great, inimitable French Poodles.

So help me (Gordon and Linda [Now it's just Linda] are still around to confirm it) whenever the aspiring writer/actor M----- stayed overnight on the couch, Pepe would take M-----'s socks outside, pee on them, usually a good dose, then deliver them back, kind of draping them gently over M-----'s shoes; as though Pepe knew as well as everyone else all you needed to know about M-----. It always seemed amazing to us and something wonderful, too, because, as Jack Olsen could very well tell you, true justice has always been rare. But here it was, and to make it perfect these were the only occasions when the poodle took it upon himself to act quite so indiscreetly. As you might guess, you couldn't begin to make this stuff up. It's not simply fiction when you're dealing with true crimes and misdemeanors. Not quite HASTENED TO THE GRAVE, but nefarious doings for sure.

If you knew M-----, you'd understand completely. Once I rented a typewriter for him, soft, foolish touch that I was, after he pleaded (using all of his amazing abilities) a desperation case that he had only to make a few minor changes and additions and then deliver his top-dollar script to whomever it was who was supposed to have been all excited about his story. So I complied, and then he promptly went out and sold the typewriter.

Despite a cascade of stories like that, everyone felt sorry for M----- (remember Gordon?) because his father had been a famous movie star in Germany, even played the starring role opposite some famous actresses in Germany. Then along came the son, who, unlike the dog that had been fully up to the challenge, had a difficult time filling those shoes.

NEXT: IS THERE LIFE EAST OF DOHENEY?

VICTOR'S SQUARE—PART 4

By Ron Kenner

5/19/98—From Henry's place on Martel, after picking up the computer for Gordon Keith, it didn't take all that long to make it out to Book Soup just a little east of Doheny, the boundary for Beverly Hills and from where they've long enjoyed the saying, "Is there life east of Doheny?"

The bookstore, across from Tower Records, spread out on the same south side of the street and just a little down from the Tower Annex, the place where they put the classical music; it has been ages now since they allowed any of that classical stuff into the main store.

Almost heartening, the annex seemed to be holding its own, as with Book Soup, typically crowded and successful, although in its way still another dying breed as an AUTHENTIC bookstore, one with more space devoted to books than to potted plants or greeting cards; and, not least, a Philosophy section that was something more than several books on Plato and Aristotle, a few additional books on pop physics and an ever-increasing number on eastern religion and mythology. They also had an impressive section on literary criticism, books on writing, and on true crime.

They even had two books of mine, or one for sure now, and they used to have the other, "Max the Butcher," published in 1982 and out of print for years. The one for sure, on the Charles Manson story, was reprinted a few years ago in a new edition, though my byline had shrunken down this time since I'd been busy and had passed on working on the revised edition.

I could remember giving a talk with co-author John Gilmore, several years back, on the Manson family crimes, and it was the same July week that the main "safe area," though one after another had been falling, was being ethically cleansed by the Serbs in Bosnia while the western world stood by, as it had done for some four years and did next to nothing. And would continue to do so until Croatia (though not without help) finally blocked that offensive in four days. Talk about being HASTENED TO THE GRAVE.

My dear friend Charles Ramsey, curiously, had checked out the Calendar section in the *LA Times* (saw that I was giving a talk at the bookstore with John when the reprint and new edition came out) and showed up for the occasion. Last time we'd seen Charlie, not that long after the first edition of the Manson book had come out, as I recall, he'd recently gotten married, then not too many years afterward went off to Colorado, eventually got divorced, put two kids through college, and for most of this time we'd completely lost touch with each other.

In fact practically the last time he saw me, as he observed, laughing—up until that reprint coming out after the 25th anniversary of the Manson crimes—“You were just coming out with the Manson book the first time.”

He looked at me then with his usual wise smirk. “Haven’t you done anything else with your life?”

So now, a few years later, Book Soup was still carrying the new edition of “The Garbage People.” That part of the title was retained, with the quote taken from Manson himself. It struck me the minute I first heard it: “Where does the garbage go, as we have tin cans and garbage alongside the road, and oil slicks in the water, so you have people and I am one of your garbage people.”

The “garbage people” in this book, of course, were a far cry from the homeless man Mary noticed—just after I’d picked her up the night before and made the turn on Vermont—sleeping on a bus bench with his old bags and accoutrements and, behind him and still visible, an ad for “Les Miserables.”

The Garbage People was/were also a far cry from those “good soldiers,” as some of us saw it then, going off to Vietnam in the sixties and seventies. Anyway, the title grabbed me, and John, too, and we went with it. What did we know about market promotion—we liked it!

“Max the Butcher,” my other book, was an “as told to” biography I authored for Lyle Stuart. My agent had gotten me the assignment for that project before I wrote the first word on it, the story of a former tough union organizer who went through a ton of that violence in the 1920s and 1930s, finally ending up in charge of the butchers in New York and New Jersey as a vice president in the international. A colorful character.

I had liked the idea of “Max” for the title, for a number of reasons, including the feeling it gave of cigar-smoking, back-room politicking and the like, and including some of the tough stuff when it came to “encouraging” both companies and workers into the union.

Among other things, Max had been the owner, with his brother—they used to call them the Block brothers—of the first Black Angus restaurant, in Manhattan, a popular steak joint which had become a hangout for one-time

great boxers—Gene Tunney, Jack Dempsey, Tony Canzoneri, Barney Ross—and also a hangout for some mobsters (including perhaps a few from Murder, Inc.), politicians and the like.

It had become apparent early on that the unions didn't stand much chance against the Pinkerton cops and the company-hired thugs, and that the only chance they did seem to have was to borrow a little muscle from the mob, which they did, until eventually the mob took over. Old story. Max himself was in no way a mobster, but got along well with everyone, and the back rooms of the Black Angus always made a good place for a quiet meet. Over time, Max told me, he'd gotten to know Gambino, Lanksy, the Kosher Nostra in Chicago, as he called it, and not least some of the guys from Murder, Inc. But basically he wasn't any kind of mobster. He'd been a clever union organizer, along with his brother, and then a restaurateur, and, among other things, owner of a country club. And somewhere in-between it all, he told me, he figured that over the years he'd lost a couple of million dollars at the races.

Lyle, seeking to beef up Max's import, had cleverly included a kind of photographic trilogy on the back cover of the hardbound; a picture of Max with Eisenhower, symbolizing the Republican party; a picture of Max with Cardinal Spellman, I guess it was (representing the church); and Max with his connections to the mob.

Even peripherally, there was so much "tough stuff" and "wise guy" stuff that while I suggested the title of "Max," Lyle preferred "The Butcher," and the next thing I knew it was out in print as "Max the Butcher."

Max is long dead and the book long out of print, but the title—unlike "The Garbage People," which carried a special meaning for me (sometimes different for some anyway)—still makes me cringe a little.

Anyway, given both of my titles in combination, and hardly being up there with Jack or Diana Gabaldon, another talented writer, I suggested to Jack that maybe I deserved some kind of reward as a co-author with the two most revolting titles going.

I'd covered police beats for papers in earlier years, and then briefly during the time of the Manson arrests, and working that night shift for the *Times*, I'd gone out occasionally on some gruesome stuff. Though actually, it's quite amazing what you remember. I once covered a suicide murder for the *Times* where a guy had killed his two children, a boy and a girl, maybe five or six years old. He'd placed them neatly on the bed, so it appeared as if they were sleeping; then he'd laid down on the bed between them and shot himself. Surprisingly, over the years, that image has popped up in my mind the most, and yet I can't recall seeing any blood, and I have no idea what it means when

it does pop up. It doesn't particularly shake me, but it's there and what can you say. It makes you sad.

Now, when I see or pass by some crime scene or hear a siren I always pull over fast—something amazingly ignored by many—and then head out again as soon as I can. It's more fun reading about crime, especially as in *HASTENED TO THE GRAVE*, which reminded me a little bit starting out of a charming and yet enlightening Sarah Paretsky novel.

Completely unlike the aspiring M-----, Jack meanwhile, whose dry-shoed footsteps I'd be happy to follow, is really getting there now, building a big rep as the "master of true crime." He'd covered some gruesome stories to, many more than I, but we thought we might compare some gory notes someday.

Even if I were to be rewarded somehow as a co-author with the two most revolting titles going, perhaps that would be more embarrassing, anyway, as I mentioned to Jack, than my having recently sent on a string of advice-to-newbie type messages to Diana Gabaldon; with my usual good timing, of course, since only a few weeks preceding my first message she was being honored as number two on the *New York Times* best seller list.

NEXT: FIRST YOU'RE AN UNKNOWN, THEN....

VICTOR'S SQUARE—Part 5

FIRST YOU'RE AN UNKNOWN, THEN....

By Ron Kenner

To: Jack Olsen (author, *Hastened to the Grave*):

5/19/98—Diana had written that she'd liked one of my pieces that I'd posted on the net, and inquired about some journalism stuff that might be relevant to a project she was working on. "Wonderful stories—I'm still laughing," Diana messaged, and so how could I resist an encore and withhold the benefit of any further writerly advice.

Of course, with my usual good timing, Diana's *Drums of Autumn* had just come out, the latest in her popular Outlander Series, so popular and successful that she'd quickly reached Number two on the *New York Times* bestseller lists, ahead of Crichton, Grisham and some of the other biggies, at least for awhile. Not bad for a supposed newbie, huh?

She sent me a lovely note clueing me in, not concerned for herself but offering a kind of friendly warning before I made any more of a public fool of myself (though of course I was already a little used to that, as writers must be, otherwise you'd be afraid to write anything). Of course sometimes you have to cheat a little bit. For example, I'm just pounding this out and flashing it off to the public forum. In a few minutes I'll take a look and see if there's anything up there—like a cease and desist message maybe!

Anyway, I sent a note back to Diana thanking her for her response and humbly noting that my own career of late reminded me of a comment by Martin Meyers, whoever he is, that "First you're an unknown, then you write one book and you move up to obscurity."

Well, I'M not complaining—I haven't seen the cease and desist message yet—and I'm thrilled to rub emails and message in such good company. We all do the best we can—though as I've already admitted, probably few writers have contributed as much to society as a good school crossing guard—while we're around, and meanwhile I was eager to pick up Jack's book at Book Soup and get onto reading HASTENED TO THE GRAVE. (One of my last resort excuses for rushing through this copy!)

By coincidence, as it turned out, the Manson book I co-authored was only a half dozen steps away from HASTENED TO THE GRAVE. Of course I'd long ago been shelved, but there was Jack, prominently displayed on the table!

NEXT: ON 'UNCHARMED PARTICLES' AND THE CURIOUS BALANCE OF THE UNIVERSE

VICTOR'S SQUARE — Part 6

ON 'UNCHARMED PARTICLES' AND THE CURIOUS BALANCE OF THE UNIVERSE

By Ron Kenner

To: Jack Olsen (author: *Hastened to the Grave*)

5/21/98—Outside I decided to head back to Hollywood to beat the evening traffic. Driving, Jack's "HASTENED TO THE GRAVE" by my side, it took a second or two to slip it out of the paper bag. I was eager to take a look, but you know how it goes—you can never get a red light when you want one.

Finally I did get a red, but it didn't last long enough; and it was the same with the others. I'd swipe a glance and the book would pull you in, a fast read, but just as you'd start to absorb it the light would change and the world was once again moving faster than you wanted it to. And with my luck, I had to be alert; even more so when I was on my own.

Admittedly I never attached much significance to the psychic world—I was still working on figuring out the material world—but Mary, Jim Holes and others would tell you that I seemed to have an incredible talent when it came to traffic. No matter where or when, I always seemed to be where the pedestrian action was.

Some cops talked about other cops like that. A kind of mystique thing. And it took on even more meaning when you realized the danger involved. Of course cops usually know how to take care of themselves, while if you're not fully on top of what's going on when you're driving you could really be in big trouble; and especially if you had a special mystique—as I obviously did—for being somewhat pedestrian. ☺

As an example, I could be pulling out of the parking area in our building at one o'clock in the morning and if there's one pedestrian within a quarter mile in either direction there's a good chance that pedestrian will be walking exactly in front of my car just as I'm heading out. And it wouldn't surprise me if he'd be on crutches and moving painfully slow. It was Jim who first brought these curious coincidences to my attention, because he'd seen it happen on many occasions when we'd been out together and if I was driving. Mary had noticed it, too. And then, of course, once you start paying attention to stuff like that, the odds are fairly good you'll see it all the time.

As I mentioned, Mary works that late shift at Childrens Hospital. And partly because she's so conscientious, the times vary some when she starts to wrap things up and (if she hasn't driven in herself) gives me the call to come pick her up. So one night she gives me the call, a little on the late side, and for some reason it took me even longer than usual to finish my paragraph, find my wallet and keys and before I finally got myself together and got going. I think maybe that was the time I found the keys in my pocket.

Coming from Hollywood, I was gliding east down Franklin, a little faster than usual but a pleasant ride, late at night with little traffic, on a stretch of road that had finally, after who knows how many years, gotten a decent paving (up to Western anyway). Then, as part of what I sometimes euphemistically call a "curious balance of the universe" (a short title might be "Uncharmed Particles"), about that time when the paving was completed on this stretch of road we began to notice the skunks, between Western and Normandie. Our friend, Gordon, one of the crowd who remembered the poodle Pepe peeing on M-----'s socks, later lived for years right in that area, though a little bit south just off Franklin on Kingsley, an extra wide palm-tree lined street of once elegant apartment buildings with canopied entrances, vertical parking, and a lovely direct view up toward the nearby observatory. My friend Art Zahler, whom I met about 1948 and call my *oldest* friend in Los Angeles used to live on that street in, what else, "the old days." On Franklin there was that curious stretch of about a mile, between Western and Normandie. On a number of occasions Mary and I had seen the skunks crossing the road, from either direction, and sometimes smelled them, but rarely saw or smelled them elsewhere in the city except here. Maybe they were house pets. If they didn't stink up the place, which they sometimes did, they were kind of cute. You'd see them wobbling fast across the road, the bushy tails and stripes bright in the glare of headlights as if waving at you to slow down. You never knew for sure when they might be around, so I kept my eyes peeled as I zipped along.



They had the subway construction work still going on for the stop coming up at Sunset and Vermont. The traffic was now going through on Vermont but that didn't help much if you couldn't make the left turn onto Sunset, as I'd

already been reminded on all too many occasions. So I'd started making that turn off Franklin onto Normandie. Driving down by myself at night to pick up Mary or to make a mail drop at Vermont, just thinking about one thing or another I'd made that turn all too often even when I didn't want to, something you had to do if you were in the right lane and didn't notice the small warning sign that for months appeared to be hiding behind the trees or foliage. Or perhaps, even when the sign was visible, you'd get distracted by that strange house (by Lloyd, son of Frank L. Wright) practically across the street where you'd make that turn onto Normandie (spelled with an ie, Los Angeles style).

Wright, the father, had designed the lovely hilltop residence for Barnsdall, the one used as an historical site by the Barnsdall Art Center complex, a hilltop gem of land donated by Barnsdall, the city's socialist millionaire. (It was probably the last architectural site Wright worked on, and may have been partly completed by his son.)

Barnsdall had donated the whole huge strip of land off Hollywood Boulevard just west of Vermont, with the provision that it be used for cultural and artistic purposes, but that didn't stop the city from making a shopping mall at the eastern edge. In some ways, I figured, that wasn't so bad—probably the only time I'd ever be coming to the defense of a billionaire—as the choice of modern architecture for the Getty Museum.

I wasn't questioning the capability of the architects or the legal requirements of how to spend the Getty money, and there were other complex issues—such as the need to adequately preserve the art in its setting. Yet you'd think the trustees might have done a better job of honoring the spirit of Getty's wishes. Given that the billionaire donor personally despised the bulk of modern architecture, and they built it that way anyway, you had to wonder what the chances were of honoring the wishes of little guys.

As with Getty, who had built castles with moats and the like around the world, Frank Lloyd Wright also despised modern architecture, and one might easily sense as much both from the residence on Franklin and on the hilltop on Barnsdall. At one of the two, at Barnsdall, I recall, the story was that they'd pumped so much money building the first half of that house that they really had to skimp to finish the other half. Somehow, amusingly sometimes, that too seemed to make for a curious balance. I had the same feeling about the residence on Franklin, though with a slightly different twist. The place had been creatively shaped—a kind of rectangle, recessed in the center, with the structure shaped like a large diamond above the entry way—and built in a kind of earthy-looking material. For years they had a huge tree, actually in the large courtyard inside, that appeared to be popping out of the ceiling somehow. Actually, after a little while it didn't look half-bad, even after the infestation and they had to take out the eucalyptus trees from the courtyard. The shape of the place wasn't as ironic as some of the residential architecture Mary and I saw in

Bogota, Columbia, back in the early eighties, when we stayed with our friend David Sanchez Juliao, a noted Columbian writer (years later the Ambassador from Columbia to India and also to Egypt), and when we got that wonderful tour from David's and our friends Indalecio Camacho, the architect, and his charming wife Rosita, the well-known actress and soap opera star there.

Indalecio was introducing interesting innovations with the economical use of parachutes, since in Bogota they often followed the Spanish tradition of building houses around courtyards, highly suitable for Spain, no doubt, but questionable in mountaintop Bogota where for months on end it can rain every day in the middle of your house. Life does have its wonderfully funny moments sometimes (so long as it's not your house being rained on, of course).

In Los Angeles, which has its own peculiarities, as anyone can tell you, that Wright house on Franklin had clearly been designed to fit in with nature—and worked well that way, too, though part of that curious, sometimes amusing balance of things, the place was clearly out of synch with every other house on the block. Of course when it was built a number of those houses weren't on the block, but you had to give Wright and his son credit, and not only for many marvelous innovations. Like Frank Sinatra, each did it his way.

NEXT: GETTING PAST THE BLACK HOLE....

VICTOR'S SQUARE—Part 7

GETTING PAST THE BLACK HOLE

By Ron Kenner

To Jack Olsen (author: *Hastened to the Grave*)

[Hi, Jack. It's been a little more of a jaunt than I anticipated, to Victor's Square. Other stuff has come up, and I've been reading HASTENED TO THE GRAVE—a great book—but I'm saving comments on this for a book review. I'll try to get to it soon.]

5/23/98—I'd been taking my mother, the psychic, around on some errands and my bronchitis had kicked in some. It may not have helped (with the coughing) that recently—talk about doing in-depth research—a colleague and I received that guided tour of work being done on the LA subway some eighty feet below street level. Not eight feet, as noted in an earlier Victor's Square segment; and any report of my being literally "hastened to the grave" is undoubtedly premature.



The problem wasn't so much the breathing as the coughing, and my mother—Sandy. My mother's name had shifted with the generations from Sarabeilla to Sandra to Sandy to Cindy to Sarai, though Cindy 'didn't take' for long and Sarai's a pseudonym. Anyway, as the coughing continued, Sandy looked at me sternly. "What you need," she declared, "is to get yourself cleaned out."

I was silent, but could feel myself tightening. She was starting up on the subject again and I just wanted it to go away. Though actually, I was not entirely opposed to colonics—for the rest of the world, anyway! But as for myself, I just couldn't make the logical connection—from colonic to cough retardation.

"It'll make all the difference. I don't know why you don't listen to me," Sandy persisted, hanging on like a pit bull. Meanwhile I was wondering, what

could I say so she'd drop the subject and gimme a break. How about: "The problem's in my chest, not my rear end, and I prefer to stay on a higher plain!"

Everyone has a different address, or a different world, and is welcome to it. But clearly the psychic world was—is not—for me. Though I'd had doubts about conventional medical practice, neither was I overly sold on the "alternative world" or "holistic medicine" or the world of sensory perception or precognition or telekinesis or raising tables or even reincarnation—except maybe for Don Marquis' Archie and Mehitabel or in that larger, pantheistic sense of reincarnation. For the most part, I preferred my carnation the first time around.

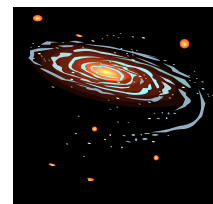
Magic was fun but I hardly took this too seriously, either, and as for superstition I always felt that was something for the less enlightened, such as hotels worldwide that (a significant reinforcement for superstition) skip the thirteenth floor, and major cities worldwide that have more 12th and 14th Streets than they do 13th.

Admittedly, I've never been much sold on ghosts, poltergeists or even UFOs. Though as a writer, I've greatly enjoyed and have great faith in the intelligence of such fantasy works as Finney's "Time After Time," Ken Grimwood's "Replay," one of my favorite novels, and, presumably, from what little I've read, of such historical renditions as Diana Gabaldon's "Drums of Autumn," which I recently snatched away from Mary's firing line and put on my firing line while Mary was recently engrossed in Jack Olsen's "Predator" book.

I've also enjoyed Star Trek tales and the like. But as for a personal change of galaxies I can't help but be reminded that even if we could travel at the speed of light we'd probably arrive, if not younger and dumber, then completely disintegrated.

And allowing that somehow we could travel at the speed of light over, say, the length of our own Milky Way galaxy, with that route it would still take us some 100,000 light years to get ourselves out of our local train station! Even some of the 140 billion plus stars in our OWN galaxy, let alone others, are uncountable (in our lifetime) light years away—another good reason for getting our own act together on this planet.

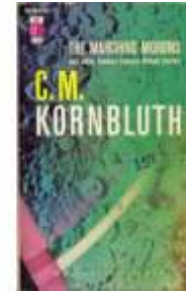
On several occasions I've mentioned the vast difficulty of galactic travel—knowing it can be tough enough nowadays on a one-day airline trip (can you imagine light years?)—but have been told, since the speed of light would still be for serious travel, "No problem! Haven't you heard about black holes?"



Talk about a fast one! Apparently that's the latest idea for overcoming the limitations of traveling at the speed of light, 186,000 miles per second. So far, our fastest space travel, some 60,000 miles per hour, is only maybe 17 miles per second. So traveling through black holes is not a serious idea. Even Sirius, as my old friend Gene Coughlin used to say when people would tell him to "get serious," is "eight and a half light years away." So is there life elsewhere in the universe? Is there life after death? How about life BEFORE death, especially for the hundreds of millions on this planet who still lead a near-death existence?

Simpletons of years past bought bridges. But black holes as a way out? Far as I know there's not an iota of scientific evidence that jumping into a black hole will get you anywhere but into deep trouble. You wouldn't jump—would you, Jack? To me when you're in a black hole you're likely getting slaughtered in the "Black Hole of Calcutta" (or Indonesia, Haiti, Guatemala, Burma, Bosnia, etc.). At best you've probably come to a dead end.

But at least these unfortunates caught in that swirl of "uncharmed particles" know a dead end when they see one. Do you remember that wonderful science fiction story by Kornbluth, "The Marching Morons" (if I remember the title correctly), about those pioneers who think they're traveling to colonize another planet when in actuality they're merely being shot out into empty space to relieve the population pressures on earth. Maybe Superstar nations can similarly shoot future troops off into space for a Far Wars Program.



We may already be traveling too fast and too far on earth in our deliriously downsized and globalized times. Admittedly the information age has brought some legitimate wonders but you have to really wonder, don't you Jack, about buying into the idea of making galactic scale headway by jumping into a black hole. All we have to do, I guess, is find that downsized "light at the end of the tunnel."

The better science fiction stories, of course, have dealt with real problems, issues, concerns that we face on earth. Yet curiously, embarrassingly, though it's never mentioned, the first and apparently the only official international communication sent into outer space, beyond the confines of our solar system, is the Pioneer Space capsule.

It still carries those official Earth greetings signed by former United Nations Chief Kurt Waldheim, who—just one of those things—turned out to be a former Nazi officer. Waldheim made it into outer space but, so far as I recall, a ding for lying about his past, he's still not allowed into the United States. Fortunately, of course, we've since launched and sent into deep space the Jupiter space capsule which, though leaving years later, is on a faster track and

has now long been surpassed Pioneer in racing away from the earth into outer space.

Undoubtedly the most popular idea promulgated over the galactic air waves has been, "May the force be with you."

I don't mind admitting, however, that when I autographed copies of the reprint of the book I co-authored on the Charles Manson slayings, I'd sometimes sign off with "May the subtlety be with you!" as I did when signing the book for my friend Charlie Brown—whom I'd lost touch with for all those years between editions—after Charlie inquired, as I noted, "Haven't you done anything else with your life?" Surely he could have been more subtle!

As for UFOs visiting earth, less than a month ago I wrote an article about the UPN nationwide syndication of an hour-long show called *Danger in the Skies: the UFO threat*. The UFOs, I suggested, were more likely *Unidentified Financial Objectives*; and the more likely danger, I added, was the danger of UPN continuing to lose millions of dollars annually, and the danger to the public of UPN or other such communicators getting too desperate for a larger audience.

Of course there's always some danger. A week or so before the UPN show on *Danger in the Skies* I'd told Sandy, who is exactly thirty years older than me, "You think you've got it tough. When I'm your age the asteroid is coming." Then, as you must know by now, it turned out there had been a miscalculation of some 600,000 miles. So things are often not as bad as they sometimes appear, though of course I still had to eat my words to my mother.

Meanwhile, did I tell you about the evil eye? —as I intended to do on first starting this note. No? Okay. Undoubtedly in some remote way it connects to Victor's Square.

NEXT: THE EVIL EYE; SPECIAL TIMING; LESSONS LEARNED

VICTOR'S SQUARE—Part 8

THE EVIL EYE; SPECIAL TIMING; LESSONS LEARNED

By Ron Kenner

To Jack Olsen (author: *Hastened to the Grave*)

5/24/98—In all too many ways we find that it is, indeed, a small world, after all; and as you shy away from places, things, ideas, experiences where you've had some unwelcome results, your world gets smaller yet. The classic case, of course, is the agoraphobic, but there are other examples, too, large and small.

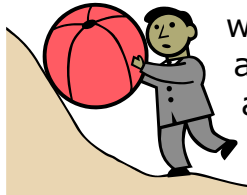
In my own case several curious occasions at Victor's Square might prove instructive. Admittedly the defugalities, as you might call them, were no fault of the well-run restaurant or wine shop or video store at Victor's Square, across from the Mayfair at Bronson and Franklin. Yet even as I pushed these episodes out of my mind I knew that somehow things take their subliminal toll and it was almost as if—especially after that follow-up bizarre incident at Victor's Square—I'd been vaguely afraid to go back to what I was now calling Square One.

With ideas, too, in certain unavoidable ways the more you reject or the less you buy into, the less you're obviously left with and the smaller the world. I don't mind admitting my own strong suspicions about the inadequacies of governmentless globalism, the increasing fast-track downsizing and the disappearing safety nets.



In an age of seemingly increasing romanticism I have some serious doubts not only about UFOs, alien abductions, space travel, past lives, ghosts and other worlds, but about our current historical moment, too.

As some are beginning to sense, we seem to have inherited in the 1990s some of the worst of the left-wing and right-wing worlds of the '60s, '70s and '80s'; that is, too much right-wing anti-government pro-merger and pro-share-holder economics (though sometimes the shareholders get the short end, too) and too much emphasis on left-wing frequently overblown "political correctness" and too much subjectivist, deconstructionist, mind-boggling postmodern culture.



At least in the likes of earlier absurdist literature the absurdities were somehow built into nature, as in Albert Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus* where you're pushing a boulder up a hill only to have it roll down again. By contrast it seemed to me that much "deconstructionist" and postmodern literature and criticism was more often the near-suicidal absurdity of left wing "structuralists," "deconstructionists" and other postmodern academicians deconstructing some of the more credible aspects of humanism and left wing politics.

With fewer things acceptable to us—politically, socially, educationally, artistically, philosophically, and so on—our world becomes smaller yet. You can see why it was becoming increasingly important therefore, that several unfortunate episodes not combine to deprive me of a fairly decent corned beef sandwich at Victor's Square. Enough is enough. Right, Jack?

Having challenged superstition and the occult, I don't mind admitting now that I was taken aback when I first saw the evil eye. And like something out of a Poesque novel—and I'm not imagining this—the evil eye just won't go away.

The first episode with the evil eye came on one of those occasions when I was en route to pick up Mary from work at the hospital. As happens not infrequently, the call came a little later than usual. Then it took me longer than usual to "wrap up" that "last paragraph," find the wallet and keys and that little something to read, in case I had to wait for Mary.

I was driving down Normandie (LA spelling) in our '89 El Dorado Biarritz—the model with the cute rear end—a little faster than usual, saw no cars coming toward me and went to make the left and: Whoa! There was a ragged old lady pushing a grocery cart in the middle of the street in front of me, crossing Sunset. I wasn't going so fast that I couldn't slow but she still gave me the evil eye. Didn't she know that I gave out quarters periodically, [especially to the guy who told me, "I'm hungry and I'm trying to keep from committing a robbery. I'm not kidding!"]. The whole thing shook me a little. Not that malevolent look but the realization of how easy it could be to have an accident, even a bad one. But then, after awhile I admit I began to wonder about the evil eye since it seemed that no matter *what time* Mary made the call, half the time, for several weeks, that old woman with the grocery cart was walking on

Normandie right across from Sunset in front of me, and still giving me that evil eye (or was I imagining things now; after all, I had read Poe)—when I made the turn. Weird!

Of course Jim Holmes, a fairly scientific type guy with a masters in psychology and some background in computers, this time didn't attribute it to any mystique on my part—just figured that poor woman spent the evening walking back and forth across the street. (Talk about a shrinking world!)

Anyway, you had to be careful. We still had "good driver" insurance, and one reason was because I'd learned my lesson, decades ago, about cars, the kind of thing you don't forget. Besides, Mary won't let me forget it. We had come into our old residence in Silverlake, along with a close friend, the late Will Dimmitt, who had known Mary since little theatre days at Long Beach City College.

The composer-singer Paul Williams was part of that crowd, and Dimmitt's sister Margie, a young lady with a mind of her own, finally married Paul even though Dimmitt, an ex-Marine Corp. MP who had since renewed acting interests and even taken up writing (talk about impracticality!) had advised her: "Forget about that shrimp—he's never going to amount to anything!"

Well I'd had many a laugh over Dimmitt doings but of course I've been wrong before, too, even when showing off for the Marines (Dimmitt). Thus Will and Mary and I were stopping at our place for something and then going right out again, and so I found a parking space practically right across the street (bad with pedestrians; good with parking spaces) and even though it was a little tight, in that last swing I just cut that wheel to the left and then backed right in, in one single beautiful motion. Sometimes it all works perfect.

I used to be an athlete, a fast runner and could zip in and out pretty good, had been on the track team at Los Angeles High School; and one of my favorite memories that way was the time I was playing football with the Los Angeles Evening Herald & Express, the Her-Ex.

We were matched against the other Hearst paper, the morning *Examiner*, or whatever other paper it was in that league we called "The Toilet Bowl," and somehow I got that ball and I was zipping in and out like a pro. That was nice, but of course I was maybe fifteen or twenty years younger than the average player, and sober, too!

What I (and Wally Zimmerman) remember about that event was our star sports writer Bud Furrillo. Already paunchy, maybe ten or fifteen yards behind

me (and as many years ahead of me), he was losing distance with every step but still yelling:

“Wait for me! Wait for me! I’ll run block for you!”

“Yeah, sure!—Keep dreaming!,” I thought, once more amused by the foibles of man.

Anyway, I had that ball and I saw the clear field ahead and I ran like hell and no one on either side of those Toilet Bowl teams was going to catch me, a nice Jewish boy who had learned to run like hell while running for my life in Al Capone’s old neighborhood in South Chicago. On such occasions you would have thought I was Tom Hanks running in—what was the name of that movie? So maybe it was the Toilet Bowl instead of the Army-Navy game, or whatever, but I had that ball and I wasn’t slowing down for anyone to come along and take me down. I just kept running and made the score.



So we all had our proud memories, like the one special homer that I hit—the only one like that in my lifetime—**when you feel the ball connect like it’s never connected before.** The next time I came up to bat the guys in the outfield moved back a half mile.

Then I struck out. And I think I struck out the next time, too. Each time the outfielders moved in a little closer, until eventually you suspected those outfielders were going to confer with the short stop or the second baseman. But it didn’t matter, because I’d really blasted that ball like I’d never blasted it before (or since) and “they can’t take that away from me.”

So we all had our special moments, and that time with Mary and Will in the car, as we were about to head out on our merry way, I was sensing an opportunity for another proud moment, even if it was cheating a little. I hadn’t touched the wheel of the car, of course, not wanting to take any chances and I knew there must be some kind of physical law, like Newton and the apple or something—only sideways! The car had already slipped into a spot in a perfect dress rehearsal for the next move. It was a tight space but it was also a matter of science and logic. Since I hadn’t jiggled that wheel one iota that last part going in and had accomplished that perfect parking job in *one simple motion*, you didn’t have to be a genius, didn’t have to calculate or recalculate the laws of the universe to know that if nothing had changed then the car should go out the same way it came in. Right?

“Watch this,” I said, catching their attention. I slammed my foot onto the accelerator.

Then—Blam!

So not everything works out as you think, especially if the car in front of you has pulled out and another one has pulled into its place, and if that car is a

little longer or has backed up a little closer. Fortunately, there was no real damage except maybe to my ego and my budding career as a race car driver.

Mary and Will were laughing so hard the tears were streaming down their faces. After a few moments I had to join them, only laughing and crying and shaking my head at the same time. Anyway, I've had the best of intentions ever since. Thus in part 9 I expect to *pay another visit to Victor's Square*. At least those are my intentions.

NEXT: A WALK ON THE MILD SIDE

VICTOR'S SQUARE—Part 9

A WALK ON THE MILD SIDE

By Ron Kenner

To Jack Olsen (author: *Hastened to the Grave*)

5/25/98—Admittedly, I'd put off exercising for awhile and weighed maybe forty pounds more than when I joined the Holiday Spa some twenty years ago with the idea of losing weight.

It wasn't as if I hadn't tried, or as if there had been no success. For example, we got Jim Quinn to start going to the gym and he got himself into good shape, after awhile, and has kept it up. But as things went, he had to wait until after the morning traffic before heading out to our place. Then we'd drive out to West LA—they didn't have the "Spa" in Hollywood then—and by the time we'd get out to West LA, find a parking space, get dressed for the gym, it might be pushing 11 or 11:30 or even noon.



I liked to spend time alternating between the pool and the Jacuzzi and Jim would sometimes join me in that. By the time we'd finish and get dressed and get out of there it was often 1:30 or 2 or even later; and then 2 or 2:30 or more by the time we'd stop someplace for a "little lunch," except that by now we'd be really hungry and there were so many nice places to eat at in that part of town. And we did live it up sometimes. Part of our reward, of course, for working so hard.

I did have one big success with the gym. For awhile, a brief "organizational period," I figured out a way to remember the combination to my lock(s) since I didn't always have Mary around to keep track. Thus one combination number was 33-07-60. So that one was easy. Thirty three was supposedly how old Christ was when he died. Seven was supposedly a lucky number. And 1960 was the year I got out of the army. To get into my locker I had only to remember, "Christ, wasn't I lucky to get out of the army!" It worked every time, at least until I lost that lock.

One day I was in the locker room with Jim Quinn while he was flipping the dial on his HIS lock and some combination of name associations popped into my mind. Then one thing led to another until there had been hiatus of weeks or more before the two of us made it back to the gym together. Maybe that was when he was getting his doctorate in psychology, letting his body fall apart while he improved his mind. Anyway, so much time had passed that one day Jim discovered he'd forgotten the combination to his lock.

"No problem," I said, remembering the code words. "It's -- -- --," and damned if it didn't work!

Meanwhile I'd forgotten a few combinations of my own, a whole string of locks all permanently hooked around the cloth handle of my gym bag.

Then they built the snazzy "spa" in West Covina, much closer to where Jim lived but quite a ways out for us, so we started going our different directions. I did cut down that way on some of the fancy meals, but it wasn't the same without Jim Quinn and so I cut down on the gym, too.

Of course there are always things you can do and here's one that might help. When I worked at the *LA Times* the editorial offices were on the third floor, and, following instructions from Mary, I was supposed to take the stairs instead of the elevator. And often I'd do this, too. But funny thing, no matter how good my intentions were I'd always remember to take the stairs down but rarely remember to take the stairs up. Well, you try.

So many years went by and so many more pounds piled up. Finally I figured out a diet plan that actually worked. I became the soup and salad king—remind me to tell you sometime about my two weeks as a salad chief in Denver, Colorado—and I was losing about five pounds a month without even spending any time hungry. These were REAL soup and salad productions, but then one day I made some killer soup—maybe a little heavy on the tabasco and pepper—and our friend Jim Holmes had an attack and we had to call 911 and the paramedics came and took him away. Of course, he'd also had a problem the day before when they sent him home from the emergency room; but he still makes noise about how it was *my* soup that near did him in. So, sorry about that!

Then the weather turned hotter and I cut back on the soups, and what's a salad without soup, especially if there's not much else? Perhaps it was a slight attack of conscience after the episode with Jim Holmes. Maybe the increase in the price of Brussels sprouts. Or that problem with my back when it grew more difficult standing for long periods of slicing and concocting and "doing my stuff" with the soups and salads.

"Well, why don't you sit down?" Mary asked. But somehow I wasn't comfortable with that—maybe—it was a guy thing—and then you get busy, and you're traveling and eating out in restaurants and then there's the holidays. . . .

I also got disillusioned. As I noted, I had some sense of that curious balance of the universe, even about the “uncharmed particles,” but somehow, for myself, I’d hoped for better. I’d actually lost those forty pounds, and more, but then it wasn’t so very long before I put that weight back on.

Then the real story comes out—almost as if you-know-who, up there, is out to get you!

It turns out that if your body loses a fair amount of weight in a relatively short period of time the body then acts to preserve nourishment and conserve weight by slowing your metabolism so you don’t burn off your food as fast as previously. In other words, despite even your best efforts in cutting down on your food supply, and eating more carefully, you’re STILL going backwards. The only solution—now they tell us—is to eat more sensibly AND exercise.

Okay. I’ll try. And I soon discovered the best of all possible exercises—walking. Jim Holmes and Mary and I even started walking around Lake Hollywood, just up the hills above us; a great place to walk or run. Once we saw Heidi Fleiss jogging there. Approaching us, she smiled faintly. We smiled back. We’ve seen many rabbits and even wild deer, in the protected area below the bridge. Who would guess, barely a mile or two from Hollywood Boulevard.

Of course we had to walk around the Lake Hollywood reservoir early in the morning, and Mary and I are late people, but we started doing that anyway, working in other walks when possible; to the drug store or whatever. And I’ve also been getting more encouragement along these lines from Mary. So next thing I’m at Victor’s Square, the little mini mall a half mile from us and just north of Franklin. They had the video store, the drug store, the laundry, the little Chinese restaurant—the Inn Place, the beauty supply place, and Victor’s Square Restaurant and Delicatessen. And then, on the corner, the wine shop, also in Victor’s Square.

I’d stopped in at the video store, wandered around for a while and rented a tape. I don’t remember the tape but if you want a recommendation, I highly suggest “Tampopo,” a wonderful noodle Western.

I requested the little bag for easy carrying, and walked almost jauntily out of the video shop.

I had my book. I had the video we could watch. It was a lovely day. Early afternoon. The sun was out. What could go wrong?

NEXT: DEFUGALTY NUMBER ONE

VICTOR'S SQUARE—Part 10

DEFUGALITY NUMBER ONE!

By Ron Kenner

To Jack Olsen (author: *Hastened to the Grave*)

5/25/95—It was now late afternoon, warm outside, and there was still light, I realized, enough for reading. Remembering Mary's advice to get in some walking, I figured it wouldn't be so bad. I had my book, and I'd do it. Why not?

Tape or no, I always had some reading material, of course, and not only in the car but with me, for when I'm inside somewhere and there's a wait. I had a small pocket book, one of the Walter Mosley novels.

I was eager to get into it and found it easy and pleasant reading as I strolled along, past the string of small shops—La Pooh Belle (the small French bar and bistro), the Counterpoint bookstore, Pritiz's (the pizza parlor), Bird (the chicken place), the Tamarind (little theater), the Daily Planet (international newsstand) and coffeehouse (where the incense was even more overwhelming than the heavily perfumed magazines—personally I preferred those skunks east on Franklin), and so on.

Reading Mosley, I walked past the charming row of shops, all facing the imposing manner house across Franklin, which appeared to be a major Scientology residence hall.

Sometimes, passing that place I'd be reminded of my friend Bixby's comments about Ron Hubbard, founder of Scientology, whom Bixby had known quite well, from when the two were both well-known science fiction writers. Bixby swore to me that Hubbard had told him, "One day I'm going to invent a religion and make a million dollars." So I didn't know much about Scientology but, given the figure, I was impressed with Hubbard's measly-million dollar modesty.

One fellow I'd met, who claimed to be heavy into Scientology and who kept telling me that anything was possible through the vast power of the mind,

finally insisted that by utilizing scientology techniques he could easily “think himself” onto the moon--not just imagine it, but actually *put himself* there.

“Show me,” I said.

“Well,” he replied, “I’m not that advanced yet.”

“Too bad!”

Then there was the time when I was developing and editing flyers, brochures, posters, newsletters, and occasional books. A very nice young lady, Susan, was working for me, doing both “composing” (typing) and paste-up. Remarkably, she was highly capable at both; and a very good thing, too, since I couldn’t afford more than one employee then. Anyway, Susan had gotten herself involved with EST, which I also knew relatively little about but which seemed to me a mild version of Scientology. In any case I wasn’t interested in EST or Scientology but Susan kept after me and after me, until one day, as a courtesy, I said, “Okay.”

I was reminded somewhat of Thomas Mann’s *Mario and the Magician*. If someone persists long enough, eventually you’ll break down. You can say “No” almost endlessly, but you only have to say “Yes” once!

So Mary and I went, but surprisingly I must admit now that this one led to one of the great, truly thrilling moments of my life.

At the end of what turned out to be a vast promotion at the Palladium in Hollywood, with several thousand prospective ESTers present, someone got up and said something on the order of:

“Here’s the deal. You can take \$300 and buy a ticket to Mexico City for the weekend, or you can use that money to join EST and change your life. Now what are you going to do?”

And that was it. Cut. Meeting over! Except that now, as you tried to leave, moving painfully slow through the packed crowd, people you’d met in your area and others nearby, keep collaring you.

“Are you going to join EST?”

“Are you going to join EST?”

“Well, are you. . . .?” And so on.

And that’s when my great moment came!
I’ll never forget it.

“No,” I’d say. “I’m going to Mexico City!”

I’d whip out the envelope that by some incredible coincidence was right in my pocket. I just happened to have purchased the tickets that morning for a trip to—you know where—Mexico City, for Mary and me. And so I flashed those tickets! What timing—Walter Mitty couldn’t have answered better!



So sometimes everything clicks. The world is wonderful. And it was a clear, fine day. I had the new Walter Mosley book to read and I moved down the block, reading as I walked, occasionally peeking over the top to see where I was going. I passed the restaurants, the manor house on the other side of Franklin, the Villa Carlotta, the gas station, Gower Street, the Best Western Hotel—an unexpected and remarkably high quality eating spot (even if the prices have gone up some—don't they all?).

I walked past all of that and more without bumping into anything or anyone; and kept my chest up, too—the way you're supposed to, as if it were suspended on a string—and slightly proud of myself for walking that half mile (although at a slower pace, while reading). Anyway, I'd obviously made it home intact, and could tell Mary I'd taken a nice walk.

Mary had taken one of the cars to work, then finally came home a little after midnight. But instead of her usual, "Hi Sweetie!," there was a tentativeness to her voice. Sophisticate that I am I could pick up on the most subtle things even if I sometimes missed the obvious ones.

"Where's the car?," Mary asked.

"What car?"

"The car! Did someone steal the car?"

There was no car in the parking space, she explained.

"Ohhh," I said. You know the feeling of instant recognition, the closing and squinting of the eyes as if to shut out the bad news. Had someone stolen the car? Again? Then, fast as I am at some things, it could sometimes take me awhile at others. It was part of the curious balance, I supposed, but it didn't take long before the obvious became obvious—I'd left the car by the video shop, in the Victor's Square parking lot!

Okay. Worse things have happened. It's hardly the end of the world. In fact, it's kind of funny. So far, anyway. So it's late but we still go to get it, except that on arriving we see there's no car in the lot. Then we see the chain up on the street side, blocking both the entrance and exit.

So it dawns on me. The two possibilities. Either the car was stolen, or someone had towed it out of there. The next day, of course, we went back to Victor's Square, returned the tape, and found out what had happened. The video wasn't so bad but it wasn't worth the \$82 and the wait it cost to get our car back from Johnson's Towing Service, just off Santa Monica Boulevard by Trader Joe's and Smart & Final in West Hollywood.

All because I was on such good behavior, and decided to get some exercise. The innocents always suffer, don't they Jack.

NEXT: JUST WHAT YOU'D LEAST EXPECT....

VICTOR'S SQUARE—Part 11

JUST WHAT YOU'D LEAST EXPECT, AT VICTOR'S SQUARE

By Ron Kenner

To Jack Olsen (author: *Hastened to the Grave*)

5/26/98—The coffee of the day at the Victor's Square Restaurant and Deli was Antigua, from Guatemala. We'd never been to Guatemala but had traveled briefly in South America and in Central America. The six months we'd spent in Mexico didn't count because Mexico is in North America, just as Mexico is also "Estados Unidos," even though us gringos have expropriated the names USA and North America for ourselves.

Of course every country worldwide had a map where they were in the center of things. Even some map of Alaska or up north shows a place kind of in the center of things that's called Great Murky Swamp. Well, everything had something going for it and at least you couldn't call it too touristy.

Years back on the way back from Bogota we stopped one day in Panama. The airline, having oversold, had tried to bump us and leave us in Panama—and just before the change of season, requiring new hotel arrangements and more costly tickets. The dumb airline was so good at stuff like this that they finally went under. Meanwhile I spent so much time getting us back onto that plane that Mary and I are now distinguished as the only two people who've been to Panama who have never seen the Panama Canal.

Anyway, Mary and I had been to Colombia, Panama, Mexico, but never to Guatemala. Yet what little I knew about Guatemala was enough to make me sad every time I thought about it, such as when having Guatemalan coffee. Guatemalans had perhaps the highest percentage of Indians of any country anywhere in the Western Hemisphere, a perfect place for exploitation and "uncharmed particles" and so it went almost without saying that they had a

history of suffering some of the most brutal working conditions. And too many of these Indians have, indeed, been *HASTENED TO THE GRAVE*.

Anyway, at Victor's Square, the Guatemalan coffee was good and went down smooth. Several of the Latin waiters fit in nicely with the coffee they served. In many places in Los Angeles you invariably had the feeling that the waiters were polite. Partly this was because so many—although they knew the whole vocabulary of eating and ordering—often spoke only very little English and so tended to let you do all the talking. How much more polite can you get? Thus in counter-distinction to the sometimes brutal honesty of New York waiters, the waiters in Southern California often seemed more kind.



There were always exceptions, as in Musso & Frank Grill, on Hollywood Boulevard, around since 1906 or some such, where I once saw Jack Nicholson (during a non-rush hour and so when no one seemed to be rushing) repeatedly ignored as he tried to get a cup of coffee for himself and his lady friend. He just sat there and took it like a wimp, and this from the guy who was in "Five Easy Pieces," too. But unlike the greasy spoon in Five Easy Pieces, Jack Nicholson, at the well-known Musso & Frank, no doubt enjoyed the large menu, the nicely prepared food and the egalitarian quality of the pace where even the celebs were treated the same as everyone else.

The restaurant and deli at Victor's Square didn't have the reputation of Musso & Frank but I'd never had a bad meal at Victor's, either. Here they seemed neither obsequious nor rude nor too busy to be available. Their corned beef sandwich was usually extra lean, and piled extra high; the matzo ball soup was wonderful, the chocolate "egg cream" went down smooth, the décor inside was quite pleasant and the view of the Hollywood Hills—through the picture frame windows behind the booths on the east side—one of the nicest anywhere.

The best corned beef, I thought, was at Factors, though Factors, out on Pico past Robertson, was a good distance from us. I'd go as far as to say, however, that Victor's had the best Christian corned beef sandwich in town, at least that I knew of. The rye was a bit soft, the matzo ball soup had other great stuff in it (though not quite what you'd expected), and what seemed to me a more Christian egg cream lacked the real bite of the more seltzerized Jewish chocolate phosphate.

Of course when you asked for a chocolate phosphate at Victor's the waiter took on that puzzled look until Bill—the pleasant young fellow (from New York, yet) who seated you and always seemed to have everything under control; never hovering yet always there—suggested the egg cream. Victor's had a large menu, too, and the prices were somewhere between "not cheap" and "not bad" which made it okay, given the upscale area just below the Hollywood Hills—a

place you didn't feel you had to "dress up" for yet a locale with a first class look about it down to the dark rug, cappuccino bar in the rear, distinctive photos, and the cute black rounded chairs like out of the '50s.

Curiously, in all the years Mary and I had been married we'd hardly even had a discussion about my being Jewish and her not so. We were pretty much on the same wave length and what was there to discuss? Yet occasionally, such as at the Victor's Square Restaurant (there was more of a separate "deli" deli as part of the wine shop), I'd be reminded of some differences and think about my Jewish "identity." Remember, when my mother once heard that I was going to Israel with a group of journalists, she said to me, "What? YOU're going to Israel?"

Thus as I'd once noted in a CompuServe message to William Stephen Cross, Mary and I seemed perfectly balanced and maybe part of that was having both the Christian and Jewish sides covered. Not hardly like a sandwich with whole wheat on one side and rye on the other but more like peanut butter and jelly, I liked to think. Surely, I figured, if I'd "worked at it," our marriage, probably I would have screwed it up somehow. So, as I saw it, anyway, we just somehow had that nice balance. As merely one example of a working balance of some kind, she leaned to health food and I leaned to junk food.

Mary is also not without a sense of humor; and I'm grateful because I'm obviously the funny one in the family, but also the heavy. Thus awhile back, as noted on CompuServe (where else do you confess your deepest secrets?), on one occasion when I was thinking deep thoughts and getting us lost on the Southern California freeways, Mary suddenly popped out with: "I'm so glad there's gravity. It keeps you close to me. Otherwise, you'd be on Mars someplace."

"Don't worry," I said. "One more piece of pie and I'm not going anywhere."

Often, of course, as I mentioned to Cross—so don't blame me for being redundant; I've heard this story before, too, you know--funniness is in the perception.

So Mary thinks I'm funny even when I'm not so sure I'm funny, such as when I race around looking for sunglasses that happen to be in my pocket. I sometimes tell her I married her because she's so easy to entertain. She's even highly entertained when I tell her, "I just did that to entertain you!"

So I may be the Jewish one but she too initiates stuff that might qualify as funny—though maybe not all THAT funny. For example, she found some cheap "emergency" sunglasses, kept them in the car. So then we'd be heading out somewhere, pull out of the building into the bright sunlight and I'll say,

"Damn!" And she'll quickly reach into the glove compartment, a faint smirk on her cute face, and make the hand off—leaving me a choice of the glare or the bright pink pair. In desperation, I might put them on—but who's being funny here?

So it was always fun eating out with Mary, and especially in a nice place like the Victor's Square restaurant—and despite my previously recent experience and the \$82 towing bill we got stuck with, it was Mary's day off and it had been a nice day, and we'd had a fine meal, and all seemed well with the universe (it's okay to forget the misery of Guatemala, for a little while anyway).

So we headed home, a mere half-mile from the safety of our domicile. Again, what could go wrong? Of course, awhile back I read that a high percentage of accidents occur when the driver is near home, when you kind of let down your guard. But leaving Victor's, I was surely highly alert. Before driving even fifteen yards, I remembered the half-corned beef sandwich I'd decided, on good behavior, to save and take home. (Don't ask me why I didn't remember it in the restaurant!)

So I was just pulling out of the driveway when I thought of the sandwich sitting there on the table in the paper bag.

"Damn!" I said. But no big deal, or so I thought.

"I'll just pull in by the wine shop here," I told Mary.

Not a problem. Until I went to make the turn.

Blam! There was a foot high metal re-enforced curb (over the storm drain) out of my line of vision but where I expected there to be a driveway, and I plowed right into that metal curb. Really jarred us, even in the heavy Cadillac.

It was only backing up that I noticed the wobbling.

Then I noticed the tire was flat.

Then, taking a closer look, I could see the tire was history!

As it turned out, there's also a "new sound"—another problem that needs to be fixed. Ask Caesar, just down the hill from us, who put on the new tire, for starters. As with the \$82 towing bill from Victor's Square, amazingly the *tire* cost \$82. Maybe they should change the name from Victor's Square to \$82 *Squared*.

Not least, perhaps, it was my first ignominious experience with one of those tiny "temporary" tires, you know, the ones that look more suitable for a tricycle.

Then... one of the bolts was damaged on that right front wheel, or frozen, and had to be snapped off. So soon afterward we lost our fancy hubcap with the wire spokes. Probably, another \$82 (though maybe we can find a replacement hubcap from a junkyard). Otherwise Victor's Squared could conceivably become \$82 Cubed, though I'd have to check with my cousin Don

Goldberg, an administrator and math instructor at Occidental College, about the math.

Curiously, sadly, although somewhat expected after prolonged illness, last year two homeowners in the two condo units directly above us suddenly died, one in fairly rapid succession after the other and with ours the only remaining unit in the stack. We didn't attach any great significance to the coincidence, but it could make you nervous if you were so disposed. You begin to wonder if maybe Someone really is out to get you. At least, I was getting nervous about Victor's Square, and so you think about what's coming up next. But if you're on a bad run then auto accident stuff can be serious, enough to even make you wonder, driving around, if there isn't some chance of being HASTENED TO THE GRAVE.

NEXT: SO GIVE THE MAN A TOASTED BAGEL!

VICTOR'S SQUARE—Part 12

SO GIVE THE MAN A TOASTED BAGEL!

By Ron Kenner

To Jack Olsen (author: *Hastened to the Grave*)

5/27/98—Coming back from Book Soup with Jack's HASTENED TO THE GRAVE I'd thought of stopping out at Mel's Diner on Sunset Strip but didn't want to get caught in the rush hour traffic coming home so I headed back the other way down Sunset toward Hollywood.

A corned beef sandwich might be nice, I thought, just *after* I'd passed Fairfax (where you had to make the right turn for Canter's) and didn't want to retrace my steps either to the deli on Sunset a little behind me, or to Canter's despite their fine bakery and good corned beef sandwiches.

I pulled into the parking lot for The Boston Market by La Brea but there was not a single parking space and impatiently I pulled out, continued down Sunset. After this there was Victor's Square, next deli in line, I knew, but of course, after the previous two episodes, who could blame me for pushing Victor's Square out of my mind.

It was a ways out there but there was also Langer's, where Mary and I used to go more frequently when we lived in Silverlake. Langer's, by 7th and Alvarado, one of the city's great delicatessens for years, had been in trouble for some time as the neighborhood changed and filled up with more poor people. Probably Langer's would have gone under except for the subway stop from downtown that had opened across the street. As someone observed, complaining about the bus system being shortchanged, we're spending a billion dollars to get a corned beef sandwich for lunch.

At least it was still a good sandwich, but the street was not the same. Johnny's Steak House where Mary and I used to go had long ago closed. There had been other losses, too, and not only on Alvarado. On Western, between Hollywood and Franklin, there used to be that small but great Italian deli and grocery shop, Fazzi's, the kind of place where some people traveled for miles for some special seasoning or pasta or maybe just a great Italian salami sandwich.

Mary and I used to stop there when we could, order a couple of salami and cheese sandwiches on a hard roll, then drive a few minutes over to Ferndale in Griffith Park, by the little stream, a remarkably cool place on a warm day, and sit on a bench. We didn't get to Ferndale as often as we liked, but it was nice. Then one day I showed up at Fazzi's and they had some new Korean owners, who might have run a great Korean restaurant but who, as it turned out, knew little or nothing about running an Italian deli.

There were always new places coming in but many that you knew were disappearing, such as the cleaners we always went to on Sunset near Normandie, where for years they had the big sign on the front window that said, "WE CLEAN SWEDE," leaving it up for months, even after I mentioned it one day.

So other than Victor's Square, the place to go for a corned beef sandwich, I knew, was Langer's. But that was farther out and I could remember that here, too, I'd had an unforgettable experience.

I was alone. I'd stopped in and ordered a lox, cream cheese and onion on a toasted bagel, having done so many times and always to high satisfaction. This time, however, the bagel came back barely toasted; and before I could say anything, the waitress was gone.

Prices were up, but I'd been looking forward to the sandwich. I'd been to the place many times, especially with Mary and my mom after we'd taken her to the doctor nearby on Wilshire. I wasn't well-known there, neither a regular nor a complainer. But this time—maybe you recognized the powerful heroic emotion that overtakes you—no way was I going to be another milktoast kind of guy.

The waitress was not only busy but had that special talent for not seeing you—well, not seeing me, anyway. Sometimes it's coincidence.

Other times it makes you wonder, as though it were part of that curious balance of things. You know, the "uncharmed particles" bouncing around. Thus yesterday afternoon, again, so help me, as I drove into our building two women were walking in the entryway directly in front of me—surely the only pedestrians within several hundred yards in either direction.

It fit with my theory about balancing acts and "uncharmed particles," so perhaps there's a reverse pattern where on certain occasions NOBODY comes near you, especially waiters and waitresses. We've all experienced waiters or waitresses moving around in a restaurant from point A to point B without ever coming into contact with the customers in-between. Maybe there's something to quantum theory after all.

FINALLY the waitress appeared and I told her about my bagel which she just registered as not particularly interesting and not very useful information.

She had customers waiting and disappeared before I could request an “upgrade.” Eventually I got her attention again. I’d now taken a few more nibbles on the bagel. Pretty soon there’d be nothing left to return.

“Well, what do you want me to do about it?” she asked, since obviously you can’t easily shove a made-up bagel, lox and cream cheese into a toaster. But as Clark Gable once came close to saying:

“Frankly, my waitress, I don’t give a damn.”

I ordered and expected a toasted bagel. Trying to be understanding, however—I could guess that waitress had been on her feet for hours and who knew what else—I suggested, “Well, why don’t you take it back to the cook and see what he says.”

She carried the plate to the long, high counter and I saw her talking to the guy and he said something to her. Next thing, the sandwich comes back—unaltered.

“He says it is toasted.”

“Oh,” I said. “Well take it back and tell him I said it’s not toasted.”

“He’s very busy. He can’t do anything about it,” she replied, slightly exasperated. In response I pushed the plate a little farther way from me.

You don’t want that. You’re through?”

What could I say? I half-nodded and she took the thing away before I was able to say anything. She just left me sitting at the empty table with my ice water, and she wrote out the check and left it.

Finally I got her attention again.

“What do you want?”

“I’d like to speak to the manager.”

“You’d like to speak to the manager?” She seemed incredulous.

“Yes.”

“Well, it’s lunch time. He’s very busy. He hasn’t time to talk to you now.”

“I’m sure he’ll find time,” I said, “when he hears I’m not paying this check.”

Then she runs over to the manager. Immediately he comes over, asks me politely what the problem is. I explained, noting I’d been a customer for years and that this was probably the first time I’d ever complained. But when I ordered a toasted bagel I’d hoped to receive a toasted bagel. Or had I hoped for too much?

“So where it is?”

“What?”

“Your plate.”

Now he’s got to see this for himself. If nothing else, the curiosity was too much for him (as if I wouldn’t know a toasted bagel when I saw one). The waitress had taken the bagel away but I figure it’s still there, halfway down the long aisle and behind the screen.

"Excuse me a minute," he said, and went over, disappeared behind the screen and came back out with the plate. He said something to the waitress, who nodded. With the plate in hand, he walked over to the counter where the waitresses picked up orders. It's a little over waist high. Now, from maybe half a dozen feet, he took that plate and flipped it like a Frisbee. The plate went flying on and off the counter, the bagel and lox and onions airborne until landing somewhere nearby.

"Give the man a toasted bagel!" the manager yelled.

So that manager saved me as a customer. If it hadn't been for his action there was probably no way I'd be going back to that restaurant, no matter how many others closed down. We have our principles. Right, Jack?

In the big adventure stories there's always that double climax. Only this particular reversal made it a pyrrhic victory! Now the place, with one less shift and fewer employees, was handling only the breakfast and lunchtime crowd and closed at four o'clock.

So sometimes, even when you win you don't win. The place was already closed.

My next stop was Victor's, by default.

VICTOR'S SQUARE—Part 13

HASTENED TO THE GRAVE; AND LOOKING FOR DIRT!

By Ron Kenner

To Jack Olsen (author: *Hastened to the Grave*)

5/28/98—On bouncing spontaneously onto the net I'd offered apologies early on for being "first drafty and long-winded," but even then I didn't think it would take me ten days to get Jack Olsen's HASTENED TO THE GRAVE from the paper bag at Book Soup onto a table in the Victor's Square Restaurant and Deli.

On one occasion years ago when I was on leave from the army at Sandia Base, Albuquerque, three others and myself departed in a small plane for Los Angeles and arrived some two days later. That was because we—well, the pilot did let me steer a little while—got off the beam and somehow ended up several hundred miles off course. We were worried about running out of gas and finally landed in a field somewhere around Yuma, Arizona, from where we then had to find out where we were and where we could refuel, or both. As it turned out, we didn't refuel, leaving us a little on the low side.

If it isn't one thing, of course, it's another. On our next jaunt it turned out that a major California forest fire had developed. The wind conditions were so bad that the pilot didn't want to chance flying over the Cajon Pass, I believe it was, and so we finally had to land at the airport in Palm Springs.

This was where, I believe, the pilot wasn't sure that the landing gear had come down, or come down right. He thought it was, but wasn't definite. He radioed the tower and the tower had us circle and then radioed back, "It looks okay."

Then we were coming in for the landing and suddenly the tower radioed back, "Maybe you better circle again. Let me see if I can get a better look (to make sure the landing gear was down okay)."

But the pilot, Joe, was worried about fuel, was already on his way in—and decided to go ahead and make the landing. Joe, who formerly had flown from aircraft carriers—an experience he described as something like landing on a postage stamp—told me to make sure I was buckled up tight. He made a fast, steep bank (it felt great to me) then brought us down to the runway in what seemed a perfect landing. He admitted afterward, however, as the tumbleweeds and dust kicked up while the plane was being tied down good, that with the winds as they were because of the big forest fire not far off, and coming in the way we did, it had been one of the spookier landings he could remember making. Would it have been more dramatic if I had known about the peril?

We stayed overnight somewhere and finally ended up taking the Greyhound bus and then some local buses, and we got in some walking, and several taxis. . . finally arriving in Los Angeles with just about enough time to turn around and head back. I got to say hi to my folks, and did meet Linda that weekend (she had just moved in with Jerry Bixby) and of course her dog, Pepe, still on good behavior (except for the barking) and long before he started to pee on M's socks. I think one of M's shoes got it one time, too.

I told a few army stories and we laughed and ate and had a good time, and then it was time to go back to the base. So in a way it was an impressive trip. Maybe even, in the farthest reaches of the mind, that altered itinerary (on a three day leave) could be stretched out into some kind of dramatic story—especially if you get in some pictures of the fire—you know, an innocent mishap a la Indiana Jones.

Admittedly, such was hardly the case in the quiet drive with Jack's *HASTENED TO THE GRAVE* (a truly dramatic book) some five miles from the Sunset Strip, just past West Hollywood, over to Victor's Square in Hollywood's little foothill section around Franklin Avenue. Here the locale was yuppily described in print—though few ever seemed to use the words aloud—as "Holly Hills" and offered along with the Victor's Restaurant and Deli, the Chinese restaurant, and the coin laundry, the Holly Hills Video and the Holly Hills Pharmacy.

As it would turn out, *HASTENED TO THE GRAVE* is a great book, and granted, a little hype may not be entirely unexpected in our age of hype. But, admittedly, for some resolution at Victor's Square was not likely to stir up the excitement even of Geraldo Rivera's famous coming-up-empty dig in Chicago for Al Capone's hidden treasure. Nor were such perambulations en route to Victor's Square comparable to awaiting a verdict at an OJ Simpson trial. Nor, in more fictional terms—for those old enough and because I can't offhand think of a better example—was the simple climax of arriving with *HASTENED TO THE GRAVE* at Victor's Square suggestive of waiting to find out "Who Shot JR."

Even allowing in our postmodern times that the process of going somewhere is sometimes more fun and more relevant than getting there, could it be, Jack, that I'd painted myself into a corner? So, in retrospect, what was the real dirt? Or could it be even that there was no dirt? Such was often the case, in more ways than people typically recognized, I knew. And looking out one of the large picture frame windows at Victor's, seeing the Hollywood Hills and actual land that was not all filled in, one somehow sensed the missing dirt; you thought of that almost without thinking about it, even in the often over-populated hills and in other parts of our increasingly filled-in cities.

Hazard zoning was clearly a hazard to economic development, and so had become (except for a few individuals such as author Mike Davis) one of the great unmentionables; especially so in Southern California where within that sixty mile radius of downtown Los Angeles some thirteen or fourteen million people had crowded in.

Architects, writers, critics and the like over the years talked about buildings, forms, materials, aesthetics, functions, economics and, in later years, environmental impact. And it is not only in the city (or in the loss of rain forests) that we're missing dirt. Yet we rarely get seriously "grounded"—that that is, simple land rarely gains a mention.

It's a little jolting to realize that some 90 to 95 percent of all life in the biosphere lives below ground. Or that the whole Mexican revolution originally came about, though hardly mentioned, because of the failure to have any kind of meaningful land reform; and similarly so in many other countries.

In past decades, the refusal to have any kind of land reform in Vietnam was one of the major underlying problems of the Vietnam war that took more than fifty thousand American lives and probably more than a million Vietnamese lives—was barely mentioned as a serious topic by the world press during all the years the fighting persisted.

So we're plenty short on appreciating the land and real dirt (or the loss of it). No wonder Mary and I were somehow thrilled to see a skunk or possum walking down the street by Franklin and Normandie, that little stretch they seem to have taken over.

Of course the paving over of prime agricultural land gains an occasional mention, but the sheer *loss* of dirt in too many places has become, one could say, a dirty shame. And not only aesthetically, but physically, too, you can literally see that something is being sucked out of the land.

Thus California novelist Robert Byrne, who spent fifteen years editing an engineering trade journal, tells us that in New York, for example, so much dirt has been hauled away over the years to allow for building foundations and basement structures that, despite all of the skyscrapers, Manhattan weighs less now than it did when the Indians had it. Perhaps that's why it's getting harder and harder for us writers, ha ha, to dig up the dirt.

Oh, you're not going to let me off so easy—it's nearing election time and you've been on the alert to unanswered questions; and even to the failure to really deliver on the third triptych at Victor's Square. Okay. Coming up in part fourteen—we wouldn't want any bad luck if we wrapped this up in part thirteen, and who knows, maybe I'll come up with something in part fourteen.

NEXT: GUESS WHO CAME TO DINNER?

VICTOR'S SQUARE—Part 14

GUESS WHO CAME TO DINNER!

By Ron Kenner

To Jack Olsen (author: *Hastened to the Grave*)

5/30/98—Before the waiter brought the menu, there was time for a quick eye swipe at the first paragraph of HASTENED TO THE GRAVE. Here Jack Olsen introduced (in what I knew was to be San Francisco) a personable character, Fay Faron, running a one woman detective agency under the listing of “Rat Dog Dick,” who was receiving the phone call that would start her on her next big case. (And an incredible case it would be, of course.)

As well, there was a sufficient amount of risqué narrative suggesting Jack’s usual good cheer to let me know that this was going to be a fun read; despite even that element of sadness certain good books often have in store for us and that lesser books tend to shy away from.

Before getting through the first half of the page I learned that Fay, keeping company with Beans, “her Rastifarian dog and confidante,” drove a “ratty old car she called the Frog Prince.” As we learned, Fay never left clients in the lurch and was—even though she was herself running a tad behind her two-year old golden retriever-German shepherd dog Beans) was beginning to remind me of Sarah Peretsky’s likeable caring, witty V.I. Warshawski—except of course that this detective lady, as the dust jacket promised, was real.

There would be bad guys aplenty, in this book exploring wide scale deception and murder of the elderly. Yet it was particularly nice, I thought—unlike the run of many post-modern books and novels today about dysfunctional characters and settings—to spend some reading time, for a change, with someone you thought you might actually enjoy spending time with. It wasn’t a complicated concept, but it was surprising none the less how many authors were losing their readers because they had forgotten as much.

Just getting warmed up, by the bottom half of the first page, Jack gives us a Chinese attorney client bringing in to Fay (Rat Dog Dick) a "simple research job" (ha ha). We learn of an Anglo Russian expatriate elderly widow who was apparently getting ripped off (turn page one) of several thousand dollars by a suspect who you could guess would turn out to be a gypsy and in with a bad crowd. And you know there's surely much worse crimes coming.

So far so good! Jack had picked on a social theme of considerable import—one surprisingly little noted in society—and looked to be presenting it in a readable way and without contributing to what might or ought to be called, in modern parlance, a crisis of literature (and angst).

I brought my head up as the waiter dropped off a menu and took my drink order for a New York egg cream and my coffee of the day, which happened to be Colombian.

It was nearly five, as I recall, and most of the dinner crowd had not yet come in. As you entered there was a high-stooled small round table for two just outside the door, a place for a yuppie coupe, each enjoying a glass of wine, or a cigarette; and then inside you came immediately upon the small stand with the sign in the usual gold letters over black that said, "Please wait to be seated."

Typically, if it wasn't crowded, Bill, the manager host, always told you to sit anywhere you'd like; and then if you tried to take up one of the larger tables by yourself he'd invited you to take one of the smaller ones or one of the smaller booths in the rear, if you preferred, next to the cappuccino bar.

The dark rug had been neatly vacuumed and the large room had a pleasant feel about it. In the middle were a number of tables set for four, with several of these doubled for a larger party, and a few for twosomes, one of which I had settled into, facing forward toward the small counter up front with a dozen empty stools. I was close enough to the large picture frame windows, just above the booths at my left, to still have good light for reading.

Not far off was the backdrop of the Hollywood Hills rising more than a thousand feet and sparsely populated with houses and mansions. [Later they'd remodel the supermarket across the street, blocking some of the view] Madonna had been living somewhere in that area, I knew, but had moved a little further east into the Los Feliz area. In either area, I was thinking, for [far] less money you might get a wonderful hilltop or hillside view of the city and no doubt a significantly larger house than would probably be the case at most places in Beverly Hills.

I was feeling in a good mood, looking forward now to digging into Jack's book and, given that last defugalty with the blown tire, it seemed a good excuse, at least this time, to eat the whole sandwich. They had a large menu at Victor's and I studied this diligently before finally ordering the corned beef

sandwich, easy to eat while reading (unless, of course, you count the potato salad that came with the order and had to be forked.)

Above the booths and elsewhere against the light-colored walls were the large, matted black and white photos, I'd guess four by six feet, of early Hollywood: historic scenes, particularly of the local area. Pictures of a Mexican standing by farm or construction equipment on an undeveloped tract of land; early urban Hollywood scenes of large box-like automobiles, mostly from the twenties; the picture of the Villa Carlotta a single block west around the corner on Franklin, where notables such as Hollywood gossip columnist Hedda Hopper once lived.

There were a few tourists walking over from the Best Western Hotel a little further west on Franklin, but most clients were locals, including some of the actors and movie and TV people coming down from the hills. This seem confirmed when I happened to look up, about the time I was reading on page four about skip tracer Rat Dog Dick's \$25 microfiche reader, old Everex 286 computer and 2400 baud Hayes modem sitting on a desk made up from an old oaken door (spray painted to look like fancy marble) and laid over two filing cabinets.

Right across the empty table next to me, sitting in the booth near the photograph of the Villa Carlotta and giving her full attention to her companion, a young boy (a likely grandchild, a private eye might suspect) was Mildred—you know, the indomitable computer whiz 'Mildred Krebs', former IRS fraud squad employee who took over, starting in the second season in the early 1980s (and continuing for more than five years), the secretarial position for none other than television's very chic uptown Remington Steele detective agency.

NEXT – TRUE CRIME AND A GOOD CORNED BEEF SANDWICH

VICTOR'S SQUARE—Part 15

GUESS WHO CAME TO DINNER!

By Ron Kenner

To Jack Olsen (author: *Hastened to the Grave*)

5/30/98—Doris Roberts, an actress of considerable talent and distinction, an attractive woman in her sixties, was looking quite natural and very much herself—like Mildred Krebs, that is—comfortable but maybe a trifle dressier (in a cheerful gold-flowered jacket) than the slightly matronly and reserved (at least when clients were present) Mildred in the offices of *Remington Steele*.

I noticed that Mildred (Ms. Roberts) had placed her purse on the table top and, as it turned out, must have thoughtfully placed a bunch of singles loosely at the top. Her grandchild (or young companion) picked a number of them out one by one in order to pay the bill.

I was tempted briefly to go over and tell her how much Mary and I had enjoyed many of her remarkable performances, in *Remington Steele* and elsewhere—not least in *St. Elsewhere*, the episode Cora and Arnie, some fifteen years back [about 1983], for which she won an Emmy Award for her supporting actress role. (She was later nominated for a supporting actress Emmy for *Remington Steele*.)

I especially enjoyed those scenes in *Remington Steele* where Mildred tried to play detective, with great enthusiasm, just plunging right in, and not least Mary and I enjoyed the trepidations this caused among “*Remington Steele*” (Pierce Brosnan) and Laura Holt (Stephanie Zimbalist).

In “real life,” of course, Roberts—later starring as a busybody with Peter Boyle and Ray Romano in the critically well-received *Everybody Loves Raymond* TV series—has played numerous major roles in stage, television and movies, some no doubt when Brosnan was in short pants. In *Remington Steele*,

Way Back In The Day: Remembrance of Things Present — Copyright © 2008 by Ron Kenner www.rkedit.com

Roberts had most likely comfortably settled into her supporting actress role, having long ago proved herself, while in real life it was the younger Pierce Brosnan and Stephanie Zimbalist concerned about their careers; especially, as the scuttlebutt had it, Stephanie fretted about the show serving mostly to advance Brosnan's career.

As the comic plot dictated, with 'Laura Holt' doing most of the real work [including the detecting] and 'Remington Steele' taking the credit, the focus often narrowed sharply on Brosnan's role, down to the titles which became a string of puns: "Steeled With a Kiss," "Steele Your Heart Away," "Have I Got a Steele for You," "License to Steele," "Steele Framed," and, appropriate for the theme, "Steele in the News." By contrast, when Zimbalist (Laura Holt) came into sharper focus it still seemed peripheral and even the pun—"Red Holt Steele," in one of the few occasions when her name made it into the title—sounded flatter than usual.

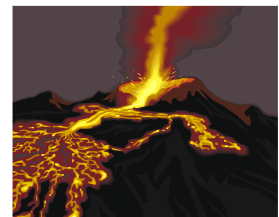
During what I called my brief "executive period," putting out the company magazine for a multinational, I gained a little familiarity with the oil industry, enough to suspect that in some ways there may, at least on occasion, have been more insight into the oil industry in "Dallas with JR than in your local Texas daily.

One of the more salient and somewhat obvious yet long ignored realities of Hollywood is that in our "age of information" the drama and the significance all-too-often split off into entirely different directions.

Nor should it be much surprise in our bottom dollar days that we've mostly opted for the peak moments of drama. And not only in fiction, but increasingly so, of course, in our daily news.

The heavy emphasis on dramatics today applies not only in promotions such as UPN's recent "Danger in the Skies: the UFO Threat" but to a considerable extent in much of our modern literature and in our movies, increasingly narrowed from social, economic, historical and political issues to stories of character, individual adventure, close ups, special effects and "events."

As I noted elsewhere on the net, when Mary and I flew to Denmark last July we saw a volcano movie on the way up and, somehow no big surprise, a different volcano movie on the way back.



Obviously, with foreign sales adding immensely to the blockbuster box office receipts, you don't need to speak much English to watch an action film or an event movie about a volcano, a tornado, an inferno, an earthquake, an attack from outer space, or the return of Godzilla.

But it's not only the movies that turn simplistic. In our single-issue, single-focus news coverage, the rest of the world fades to oblivion as we jump from Michael Jackson to OJ Simpson to Princess Diana to Lewinsky or Paula Jones. Lewinsky alone got more of a rise out of the press than the story of our crumbling cities at home or the frequent failures of downsizing (for the company as well as employee) or our recent senate approval, with little discussion, of the multi-billion-dollar expansion of NATO abroad—an action which could potentially serve to jump start Cold War II, cost well over one hundred million dollars, and potentially make it increasingly difficult (with weaker support from Russia) for the United States to deal with serious problems in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, not the least of these including nuclear testing by India and Pakistan.

In the USA, despite the immense coverage of crime stories, the coverage of the cause and the fuller impact of crime (as in the issues raised in *HASTENED TO THE GRAVE*) or even insight into the demographics of crime has long been at low ebb. Even in the worst cast scenarios, society still seems more interested to execute the psychopath than to study him.

Unfortunately, all too few realize the difference between a true crime book such as *HASTENED TO THE GRAVE* and the typically meaningless true crime reporting we get with our Nightly TV "news" fare. What would really be news, of course, would be if there WASN'T a shoot-out, stabbing, car chase, rape, robbery or arson in a tightly compacted urban area housing many millions of people.

Such events as the [real life] staged shotgun suicide on the Los Angeles freeway system are undoubtedly significant and newsworthy, yet even here mostly what we see is the violent, dramatic culmination—not the deeper story of the life unraveling or the causes and impacts and costs of that unraveling. Similarly, the TV car chases we watch represent the culminating events—rarely the broader picture or an extensive depiction of a significant pattern or of events leading up to that pattern, as we see, for example, in Olsen's *HASTENED TO THE GRAVE*.

Frank McCourt, best-selling Irish author of "Angela's Ashes," had been asked once if he'd considered writing "serious literature," as I recall, and responded in words to the effect of: "Oh, you mean the same thing I'm doing now, only with no plot and no beginning, middle or end?"

In an even less satisfactory way, our TV news typically gives us chaos and incoherence. In too many ways, I suspect, much of our experimental and serious literature gives us another dose of chaos. All too many nowadays, anyway, have seemingly become overly enamored with chaos, irrationalism,

paradox, absurdity, emptiness, hopelessness and incoherence. Olsen's HASTENED TO THE GRAVE lends new meaning to the term "cop out," yet does not revel in incoherence. The book does not so much take things apart as masterfully, at great pains, weave them together (after exhaustive research) into a meaningful coherent whole.

Olsen is now gaining recognition as "the" master of true crime. Yet many true crime books, even in the hands of a master, remain grossly underrated by many readers today as a meaningful genre in literature. Often such works are little appreciated for the effort to piece together a coherent story, and often they are too little recognized for the depth of content and the larger relevance to society, beyond the too frequent titillations of the press and TV.

Admittedly, much of the more experimental, highly personal, "art for art's sake" serious literature may provide some needed challenge to the smugness of modern civilization sometimes overly proud of its rationality. Yet it may also be that our most serious look at society itself today is coming not so heavily from today's "serious" and "experimental" literature as from more popular works, as if maybe even many among the relatively unlettered public knew something that many critics and artists either didn't know or had forgotten.

So much quality literary work has become available in genres and places where you'd least expect it. And not least, such quality has been popping up in certain crime or detective fiction; including, for example, such "entertainments" and thrillers, to name but a few, as the novels of John D. MacDonald, Ross MacDonald, Lawrence Sanders (The First Deadly Sin), Martin Cruz Smith (Gorky Park), Phillip Kerr (A Philosophical Investigation), John Le Carré, or "true crime" books such as Olsen's HASTENED TO THE GRAVE.

Olsen's book not only actively seeks coherence (even when depicting society at its most absurd), but takes responsibility to put history, sociology, urban affairs, politics, economics and, not least, morality back (or, at least, more deeply so) into literature.

Meanwhile, not only was HASTENED TO THE GRAVE a fine read, but it was nice to see Doris Roberts and recall moments with "Mildred" who in a pleasant way, for all the flim flam of a light comedic show, had been a small part of our family for a period of years.

And of course Victor's had fixed me a good corned beef sandwich, lean and piled high, with a nice pickle. I ate all of it, and the potato salad, and the egg cream went down smooth. I remembered to take the car, and didn't get a ticket on the way home.

So as I started to say in the first segment of my planned triptych, the third time at Victor's Square was the charm! ☺