

WETSUIT



DRAWINGS BY ROGER HAYES

BY JOHN PAUL BARRETT

I became city editor at the paper the same way I had become assistant manager at the finance company: there was no one else. They were thin titles in lieu of pay, like performers who nearly disappear when they turn sideways.

Sick of college journalism classes, I walked into the newspaper office several months before, offering to sweep floors, run errands — anything to just get out of school and into the business, near desperate to start anywhere. I thought it was my destiny; seems it was, in a strange way.

As luck had it the city editor had just quit and I took his place. I'm not sure what I thought the job would be like, but it wasn't like anything I expected. Almost every word I wrote, good or bad, was printed. Nobody cared much. After a few months, I didn't care much either. None of it seemed to really matter. The romance of being a newspaperman was there. I could drink and nobody said anything. It was as though everybody expected newspaper folks to drink; it seemed to go with the territory, and that was fine with me.

I could drive with the knowledge that, if stopped, I could show my L.A. County Sheriff's Department press pass and go on my way. There seemed to be an understanding, as though the officers would automatically assume I was headed somewhere important. I was stopped a few times, but nobody ever said, "Where's the fire?"

I arrived late to work nearly every day and nobody cared, I guess, because I usually stayed late. Nobody seemed to know or care just how many hours I actually spent working. What was working? If I was having a beer at the tavern next door, talking to someone about anything connected with the paper, that was working. Otherwise I was just on a well-deserved break. Nobody ever said anything about my absences from my desk, so long as the paper got out twice a week, and it always did.

My desk was the first thing you saw when you came through the paper's imposing double doors — they opened onto a large, dusty street next to a railroad track. The desks were always coated with grit. Each morning I brushed some away; at night I blew mud from my nose.

Mick, the owner of the convenient tavern next to the office, was always happy to pour more beer. He understood everything. He understood everything about keeping regular customers. He could talk to me (usually on any topic, whatever it happened to be that day) like a good bartender, standing there next to the tap as I drank the last from my warm glass, his hand resting on the cover of the cooler where the fresh, cold glasses were. I liked fresh, cold glasses and that first, near-freezing hit, after which one clicks tongue to palate and goes "Nyahhh!"

After a few beers I drained the last saliva-warm mouthful from the hot glass I had been nursing and head back for my gritty desk to "call so-and-so" or try to glean something printable from one of my stacks of mostly useless mail.

Sometimes the real estate section man would slip me a fifty to rewrite a description of a property or development. These stories were constantly rewritten. It was excellent practice at low-level writing. Occasionally I would recognize a piece I had already rewritten weeks or months before. So I would rewrite it again, changing words, moving parts of the story around to make it seem fresh, should anyone have read the previous story. I am almost certain no one did, except me, of course. It was absurd, and there was some comfort in that for me. "This is fucking stupid," I would mutter. And then I would think of what I could do with \$50 and rewrite the story, even if I had something else to do, for which I was already going to be paid at the end of every week. Like I said, the paper always came out.

A few times after work, or even during, I drank with Dean, one of the other editors. We stopped at one of the many juice joints in the area and talked about everything there was or had ever been. The guy was a genius and a near-total cynic. He had thick glasses, a permanent sneer and a quick, razor-sharp mind. He was an L.A. denizen, beyond hip, minimal and terse. He was an excellent writer and could probably have made some money at it, but he was also a hopelessly addicted drinker. I've known a few of these fellows; they simply can't function in the world without a wetsuit. To make them do without booze would be like leaving a fish out of water. Dean would surely drown in unmuted reality.

He told me he was gay (I think he actually said "I'm trysexual. I'll try anything"). He lived with a man he called his brother, but I think they were really lovers — even if they were brothers. I didn't care.

Dean made a few passes at me, usually when we were both drunk or drinking. I didn't mind. I understood. I just said I wasn't interested and we stayed friends, bound by the powerful common glue of drink and words. He was funny and smart and I liked him. His homosexuality and drunken moments were small things. They seemed to fit the rest of him. No big deal. Gay people were everywhere. He could hardly have been expected not to have been gay. He told me he was working on an epic gay novel.

One morning I was uncustomarily early to work. I pulled into the area next to the railroad track, which we employees

used for a parking lot, and killed the little VW's engine. Since it was early I decided to just sit for a few minutes and have a cigarette.

I noticed through the windshields of the cars in front of me that someone was also sitting in a car before heading for those big dirty doors. I couldn't see who it was at first, but then the car door opened and Dean's skeletal frame emerged. He didn't see me. I watched as he reached behind the carseat and withdrew a full bottle of clear liquid from a paper bag. He looked around, unscrewed the cap, and tipped the bottle to his lips. I could see the bubbles rising to the upturned bottom of the bottle as about a quarter of the liquid was replaced by air. Dean carefully swung the fifth down once more to the upright position and wiped his mouth. Then he put both hands against the side of the car, still holding the bottle in the right one.

A big hump formed at the base of his spine and rolled its way up to his shoulders as he bent forward with a few muted jerks and expelled what he had just ingested, in projectile fashion — but not without some remarkable control I must add; he seemed to know what he was doing.

Dean straightened up and wiped his mouth again on his coat sleeve. Then, to my amazement, he raised the bottle. Again the bubbles rose to the surface as the level of liquid diminished to roughly half. I could see the adam's apple working up and down as he swallowed. I knew he was a drinker but I never witnessed anything quite like this. Once again the thin body roiled and heaved, and once again the fiery juice spewed to the ground near the left rear tire.

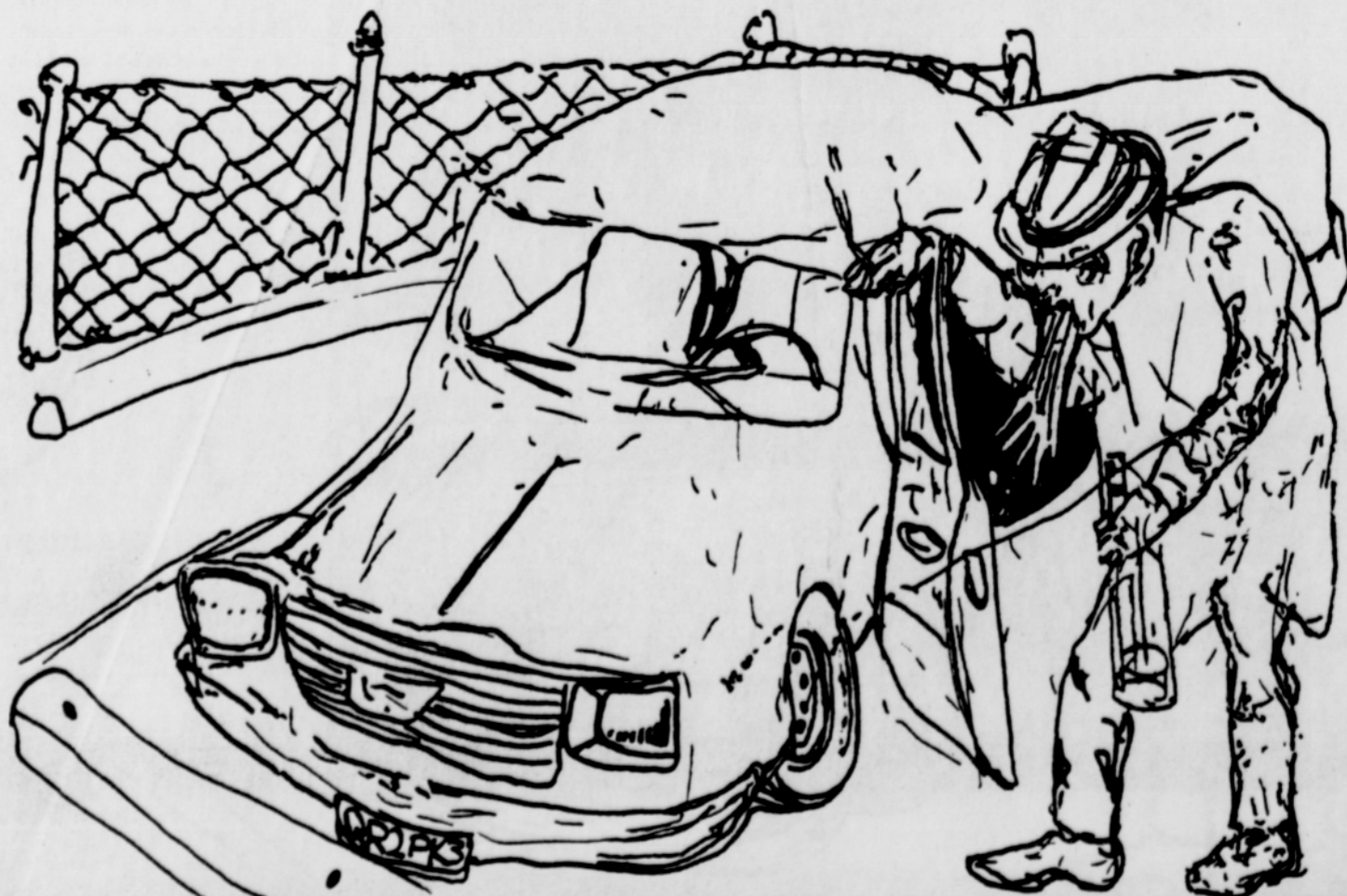
Then he unslumped, coughed several times, and took a few smaller sips from the bottle; leaving, I suppose, just enough to get through break to lunchtime. It stayed down.

Dean fished around in the pockets of his sportscoat for his long smokes and lit up one before walking across the street.

I sat there for another minute or two after he went in. Then I flipped my smoke out the window onto the tracks and got out of the VW. It was a few minutes past 9. It was time to go to work.

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