

Chad Taylor / DIN (2005)

X-rays will damage photographic film 200 ASA and below. Please remove exposed film from luggage. Los Angeles Airport Authority.

Earl drops his bags and stops to read the yellow sign.

Earl is wearing a cream pants and prescription shoes and a gold wristwatch that looks like it's worth two thousand bucks.

I live here, you know.

I used to live here.

I'm visiting.

*

The glaziers are Mexican. The gardeners are Mexican. The concierge is Mexican. The old window frames are thick with putty. A layer of thumb prints runs around the edge of the pane where it was pressed into place decades ago.

On the corner of South El Camino a fenced field has yellowed to the colour of straw: the desert without watering.

On South Rexford the financial section of the *Los Angeles Times* lies unopened on the edge of the dark green lawn.

*

A black Cherokee is parked in the lot behind Dr. Birnbaum's Skin Revision Centre. The woman with blonde highlights is screaming into a flip top cell phone.

'Please recall the bill,' she screams.

'I cannot live like this any more.

'The whole time he's been out on bail.

'Give me the name of the bondsman. Give me the bondsman's name and I will call

him.

‘He will not be high.’

She screams.

‘My God. Give me the name and I will call.’

She screams and hangs up.

She makes another call.

‘Just tell me why. Tell me why. Didn’t he pay you back? He paid you back. No.

No! I’m warning you.’

She screams.

‘Please. You’re my mother. My life depends on it. My life depends on it. Why won’t you do this? I don’t understand why you’re not protecting me. You know what? I’m asking for my life. I’ve never asked you for anything in my life.

‘Recall the bail.

‘Listen to me. Mother? Mother? I’m on a cell phone. I’m on my cell phone.

‘I have been asking for months. I’m putting my life in your hands. Of course he will pay you back. Has he ever not paid you back?’

She wipes her eyes.

‘Oh my God. Oh my God. No. No no no no. Why are you doing this? You just don’t know him.’

She hangs up. She reverses the Cherokee and drives out. A black standard poodle leans panting out of the passenger window.

*

The girl behind the counter is wearing white health sandals and white ankle socks with Playboy bunnies on the cuffs.

‘A tall non-fat hazelnut latté.’

‘You’re very handsome.’

‘Thank you.’

*

Raymond is checking the online bookings when Margaret comes down into the foyer wearing a floral pants suit.

‘Good morning, Margaret.’

‘Hi Raymond. Can I get a coffee?’

‘Is there coffee there?’

‘I think it’s all gone.’

‘Okay, I can make you one of those.’

‘Thank you, Raymond.’

Raymond grinds the coffee beans.

‘Have you finished all your meetings now, Margaret?’

‘They were good, thank you.’

‘Did you do your yoga this morning?’

‘I had to go to my meetings but I’m going to do it a little later today. Have you ever done yoga, Raymond?’

‘My brother in-law lost weight with yoga.’

‘You can do that if you do ashtanga.’

‘He had a weight problem and started yoga and he lost weight.’

Raymond thinks about it as he fills the plunger.

‘His cholesterol went down, too.’

*

There is very little bird song in the mornings. Shallow bird song that disappears before the sun outshines the light bulbs in the window.

The office wall clock is big enough to read from across the street. There is a paper tray and a printer sitting on top of the filing cabinet. It looks like a movie set of an office.

*

Michael stands on the corner of Wilshire straightening his Starbuck's cap.

'I mean I hate to do that - to go entirely on feel, you know?'

'But hey,' says Michael's friend. 'You have to feel good about it.'

'That's it. For eight hundred, I have to feel good about it. I have to feel great, and it just doesn't.'

'But you feel good about this, right?'

'I feel good about it, sure.'

'It's like I said: the thing I have is people skills. I know people. And that's something you can't learn or be taught.'

'Okay, so over the next few days: have a think about it. Tell me what you're good at, what you're not good at. And basically there's a place open to you at Beverly Hills.'

'That's great.'

'Hey - it's all down to Mina, man. You should send her flowers or something.'

*

The traffic is quiet because the cars are all new.

'Gas is killin' me, man.'

The taxi drives up Santa Monica Boulevard. The sign on the thirty storey office block says CENTURY CITY.

'Where are we now?'

'We're in Santa Monica Boulevard.'

'What area?'

'Uh.' He looks around. 'That's uh, Century City over there.'

'The building?'

'All these buildings are office buildings. There's no homes nor nothin'.'

*

Neatly parked cars at 2:46 a.m., the alarm lights on each dashboard winking like a row of baby monitors.

The film books on the side table, unread.

The air smells sweet, like vanilla.

*

In the food court the Mexican kitchen worker stands just outside the perimeter of the themed booth, the cigarette smouldering between his tattooed knuckles. The counter sells Italian and Buds and other beers to take away as well as coffees and fruit-flavoured soft drinks. The raspberry snapple is too sweet to finish.

The man sitting outside Khyber Express Indian Cuisine is labouring to read a script. The corners are marked by repeated photocopying.

*

A fat kid named Bowie is sitting on the floor of the book store.

‘Come on, Bowie.’

‘I’m coming, Mommy.’

‘You want to see *Shrek*?’

‘Look at this.’

‘You showed me that already. It’s time to see the movie.’

‘Okay.’

‘We’ll go see the movie now. We can come back and look at the book later.’

Bowie puts the book back and raises his hands like a dealer clapping out.

‘I’m done here.’

‘Good boy.’

*

“The arrival of sound with its vastly increased costs confirmed the dominance of Hollywood... making this new art form, for many intellectuals... irretrievably damaged by commercial considerations.” (p.46)

*

The sunset runs from copper to pink. The hills are flat and grey. The palms surrounding the airport are ruffled yet orderly, like a salad.

Earl sweats as he carries his bags on to the plane.

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Chad Taylor’s new novel is THE CHURCH OF JOHN COLTRANE.



