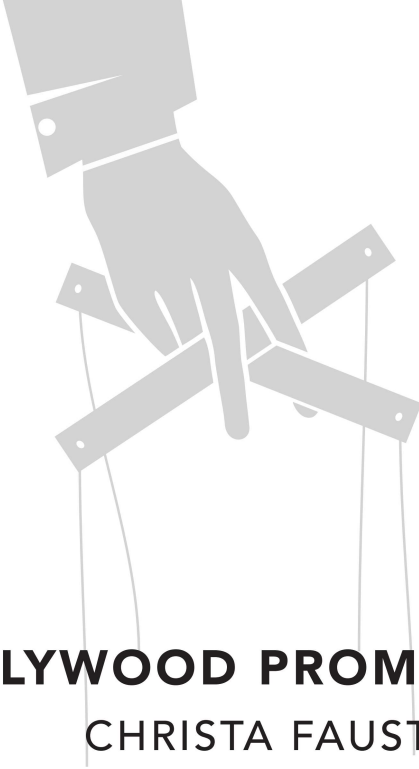




HOLLYWOOD PROMETHEUS

CHRISTA FAUST

Los Angeles
1952

"Are you married, Mr. Cole?"

I was not married. I was also not Mr. Cole, but I'll get to that in a minute.

First, some relevant details about the questioner, a Mr. James Whale. A British man with a Hollywood tan. Early sixties. Six feet. Full head of white hair and dark, haunted eyes. Large hands with long expressive fingers toying restlessly with a French cigarette. Well-dressed, clean shoes. A once famous man, now less so, but still far more so than I.

My usual tactic when asked that particular question was to fall back on a self-deprecating comment about my profession. After all, the science of the dead holds little appeal for marriage-minded ladies. But when Whale asked me that question, he made it quite clear that he was asking an entirely different question. One that made my palms sweat and my heart race like a whipped horse. One that I could not possibly answer.

It was difficult not to flinch from the filmmaker's gaze as he analyzed the angles of my face and body, perceiving me relentlessly and without mercy. Placing me into a narrative context of his own creation just as he would have positioned an actor within the camera's frame.

His scrutiny made me want to abandon my quest and flee with all

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my monstrous secrets clutched tight to my chest.

I didn't. I simply responded to his question with a terse shake of my head and looked down at the business card I'd given him. The one he'd regarded with a wry, raised brow and then tossed onto the rococo coffee table between us. My boss's business card, Deputy Coroner Hayward P. Cole.

"Tell me about the boy," I said. "The boy in the purple jacket."

You want to know about the boy too, don't you?

He came in as a John Doe on the second day of one of my boss's increasingly frequent dipsomaniacal absences.

I'd started off as a janitor in the L.A. County morgue and through a combination of intelligence, ambition and a strong stomach, I'd risen up the ranks to become Ward Cole's assistant and indispensable right-hand man. I did nothing to discourage his drinking, because it made him increasingly dependent on me to cover for him and keep our department running smoothly. It also allowed me unfettered access to an endless supply of hobos and hopheads whose broken, unloved bodies taught me far more than the night school classes I'd been taking in my spare time.

So it was just me and the boy that day. The unexpected police sergeant who had come in with him was quite emphatic that this case needed a tight lid. That this one was rough, so rough that several uniforms lost their lunch on the scene.

"Brass needs this to stay out of the papers," the cop had said, his tone hushed, like whoever had done this to the boy might be listening and come back to do the same to him. "Minimal paperwork, COD unknown. Rubber-stamp it, file it as indigent and transfer the stiff over to Boyle Heights in the next batch of unclaimed remains."

"What do you want us to do with his clothes?" I asked. Unless they had been fused to the body, by extreme heat for example, personal effects were supposed to be either bagged and tagged or discarded before any cadaver arrived in our department.

"Make 'em disappear," the cop replied, pressing an envelope of cash into my hand. "Along with the rest of that kid."

He couldn't leave quickly enough.

The boy had been young. Maybe sixteen. Five foot five. Slight

build. Pale complexion. Dark hair, freshly barbered in a sporty brush cut. Precise eye color difficult to determine upon initial examination due to corneal opacity and extensive conjunctival petechiae.

The clothing in question consisted of a flashy purple dinner jacket, a matching cummerbund, a starched white shirt and a black bow tie. No pants or shoes, just a single black sock.

Which brings me to the aspect of this case which needed to be kept out of the papers. Not the boy's death, because the death of one more juvie hustler was hardly newsworthy in a ruthless Hollywood ecosystem that ate pretty teenagers for breakfast every sunny, postcard-perfect day.

It was the manner of his death that needed to be kept hidden. Not the asphyxia that sped up his inevitable demise, but rather his more unusual pre-mortem injuries.

There is no gentle or pleasant way to say what I must say next, so I will simply state the facts in a straightforward and clinical manner. Both the genital and rectal areas exhibited extensive laceration consistent with a small but sharp object, such as a pocketknife, resulting in substantial tissue loss.

It was this grievous wounding that had been so unsettling to the patrolmen who had found the boy's discarded corpse in some scrubby underbrush near the Greek Theater. Far more so to me, who saw these wounds clearly and completely, illuminated by the harsh fluorescent light of science, and yet was still undone on such a fundamental level that I could barely breathe. Albeit for entirely different reasons.

At home that night in the modest courtyard apartment I shared with a clever tabby tomcat named Percy, I could not get the boy out of my mind. I could not eat my half of the tinned sardines I normally shared with the feline, so I shoved away the unopened sleeve of saltine crackers and scraped the remaining fish into his bowl.

Allow me to reiterate at this point that I am not a man who is easily disturbed by the indignities of the murdered dead. If I were, I would not have been fit for the job I'd worked so hard to hold. But I do suffer from a pathological loathing of excess flesh, one that leads me to limit my daily caloric intake in a rather strict fashion. You see, I had been quite fleshy in my youth and that fleshiness had attracted the attention of a certain man. A man who availed himself of my flesh and left me anguished and deeply confused by a slew of terrifying and contradictory emotions that shattered the very foundation of who I

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believed myself to be. Caustic shame. Existential dread. Horror and hunger and beneath it all, a perverse longing for the very debasement from which I so viscerally recoiled. From that point on, I vowed to whittle away the flesh that had betrayed me and assiduously avoid being touched by anyone ever again.

The boy in the purple jacket had touched me. Even in death, he had touched me in a dark, unspeakable place hidden deep inside my calcified heart, dredging up old terrors and bringing back that anguish and loathing with such intensity that I found myself driven out into the balmy Southern California night. I walked the streets of my sleeping neighborhood at a brisk, near panicked pace that bordered on a run, as if I could outrun the demons that the boy had awakened inside me.

I could not, of course.

I'm sure that by now you are beginning to sense the shape of deliberately omitted information lurking like monstrous shadows behind my carefully crafted recollections. I promise you I will eventually tell you everything. It's just that my secrets are shy creatures who cannot be forced from their hiding places. One must wait patiently for them to emerge.

In the days that followed, I found myself possessed by a burning desire to find out everything I could about the boy before his transfer to the crematorium.

My first stop was a small tailor's shop called Marcel's in Bunker Hill. I had been directed there by the label inside the purple jacket I'd carefully removed from the boy's cold body.

Marcel's was on Clay Street, which was barely more than an alleyway lurking beneath the tracks of Angel's Flight. The only indication that the little shop existed at all was a hand-painted sign in the dirty, opaque window featuring a dancing needle and thimble and an arrow pointing towards an otherwise unremarkable metal door.

Marcel himself proved to be a chatty Black man with conked hair and an unabashedly feminine demeanor. Five foot eight, thickly built in the lower body, wide-set dark eyes and a large mole on his left cheek.

He wore a gold pinkie ring and pinched the humble gray fabric of my Sears and Roebuck suit jacket with curious, hungry fingers.

"You came to the right place," he said, looking me up and down. "Because these lapels should've never come home from the war."

"I'm not here for clothing," I replied. "I'm here for information."

His eyes hardened, face locked up tight.

"You a cop?"

"No." I took the carefully folded purple jacket from my attaché case. "I'm looking for information about a . . ." I paused, forcing myself to push through my hesitation. "A young friend. He was last seen wearing this jacket."

Something unspoken seemed to pass between us, and his face softened.

"Where did you find it?" Marcel asked, taking the jacket and smoothing it out gently on a nearby table. "How'd it get cut up the back like this?"

"It was discarded in the brush near the Greek Theater," I said. I didn't tell him that the boy had been discarded with it. I also didn't tell him that it was I who had carefully excised the bloodstained sections as I cut it free from the boy's body. "That's all I know."

"I made five of these," Marcel said. "For a client named Jerry Tashman. Runs a chicken house and likes his boys to match for parties. I like the repeat business."

"Do you have any idea where he might have taken those boys two days ago?" I asked.

"Ain't my place to know Hollywood people's business," he said with a shrug. "And from the look of you, I'd say it ain't your business either."

"Where can I find this Tashman?" I asked.

"You don't listen, do you?" Marcel shook his head like a disappointed parent. "When he's not busy casting, you can usually find him holding court at the Shanghai Room. But you didn't hear it from me."

I let him sell me a silk tie that was entirely too luxurious for my line of work, which he knotted around my neck with a flourish. Then I headed west, into the Other Los Angeles.

The bus that ran west on Sunset Boulevard was always crowded with stoic domestics and gossiping waiters and hard-faced, bosomy b-girls

stuffed into obscenely tight dresses. Denizens of my humble Los Angeles traveling into that glitzy, Klieg-lit dreamland of movie stars and hot spots and the perpetually illusive promise that you too might “make it.”

I didn’t look out the window. I wasn’t interested in glitz or fame. Quite the opposite, in fact. My reading material, a lovingly worn copy of *Simpson’s Forensic Medicine*, assured that I had no seatmate for the entire trip.

The Shanghai Room was just down the block from the Mocambo but it may as well have been on another planet. The sign was only slightly more obvious than Marcel’s but the faded, faux-oriental interior was something out of a 1930s movie about opium smugglers. Threadbare red velvet and chipped gold flourishes and dusty Chinese lanterns that cast strange feverish shadows across the faces of the patrons. I wondered which one of them might be Tashman.

I ordered and paid for the signature Shanghai Mai Tai, which I did not touch, and observed the scene for several minutes. The patrons were mostly men, except for one older lady with a long cigarette holder who had not changed her style since the silent era. The woman was the only one who could have been described as holding court, surrounded as she was by her all-male entourage of admirers.

“Want to order something else?”

The bartender was a tall man with a slim build, slicked back salt and pepper hair, a pencil mustache and a distinctly smarmy demeanor. He was clearly not Chinese despite the vaguely Asian cut of his uniform jacket. He gestured at my untouched drink.

I looked at the drink, which was really quite attractive with its cheerful fruity garnish, but given the egregious amount of sugar contained therein, I would have sooner ingested rat poison.

“It’s fine,” I said anyway, sliding a folded ten-dollar bill across the bar’s sticky surface. “I’m looking for Jerry Tashman.”

The bartender quickly suppressed a bemused smirk.

“Really?” he said. “You don’t strike me as a Bobby Driscoll fan. I’d have pegged you as more of a Muscle Beach enthusiast. Skinny, bookish types like you usually want to get tossed around.”

How could he possibly know something so private about me? How could a complete stranger have intuited my most shameful secret so easily? Yet this man had just said out loud a thing that I had been unwilling to acknowledge even to myself.

Because I do, in fact, own a stack of Muscle Power magazines, each one purchased from a different newsstand in far-flung neighborhoods across Los Angeles. And I do, in fact, look at them in the lonely hours of the night with a combination of corrosive jealousy and helpless, primal arousal culminating in a humiliating paroxysm of involuntary physical response. Which I vow never to repeat yet inevitably do.

"I need to talk to Tashman," I forced myself to say.

"Well, you're out of luck," he replied. "Word is he skipped town just yesterday. Must have gotten caught with his hand in the wrong cookie jar."

"I'm looking for one of his boys," I said. "Five foot five, dark hair, slight build."

"You just described them all," he replied, his knowing smirk back in spades. "Tash definitely has a type."

"Where are they now?" I asked. "These boys?" He shrugged.

"Some got scooped up by other agents right away," he said. "Others went back to wherever they came from." He poked a thumb at a doorway marked PRIVATE. "I got one back there working stock and sleeping behind the empty kegs if you want to talk to him."

Needless to say, I did.

That boy was named Billy, and he was eerily similar to the boy on my slab. The only difference was a spray of charcoal freckles across his upturned nose. That, and the spark of life in his bright blue eyes, of course. When he saw the money in my hand, he flashed a sugary Shirley Temple smile.

"You want a suck job, mister?" he asked with the chipper enthusiasm of a newsboy hawking the morning paper.

I shook my head.

"I want information," I said. "About one of your friends who went missing yesterday."

A shadow of hesitation flickered across his face, but it was easily dispelled by a generous handful of the police sergeant's cash.

"Adam," he said, brows creased into a thoughtful frown. "He left the party early and that's the last anybody saw of him. We were supposed to meet up the next morning, but he never showed."

"Do you know Adam's last name?" I asked. "Or where he was from?"

Billy shook his head.

"We all go by Tashman," he said. "And most of us don't wanna

remember where we're from."

"Where was this party?"

"Up in the hills near Griffith Park," he said. "At this big fancy estate owned by some old movie director. Great pool."

That was how I wound up talking to James Whale.

"Jerry Tashman?" Whale shook his head. "Doesn't ring a bell. Must be one of Pierre's friends."

He gestured with his chin towards a tan and semi-comatose young man lying on a chaise lounge out by the pool. He was quite hirsute and barely dressed in tiny white swimming trunks that did little to conceal the anatomy beneath.

"I hardly know anyone at my own parties these days," Whale said, dark eyes gone contemplative and melancholy.

"You're too young to remember," he continued. "But the time between the wars was nothing like today. So open and vibrant, filled with art and wit and beautiful young men who thought the party would never end. That all changed with the Second World War. Did you serve?"

"Four F," I said, my usual response. Given my eyeglasses and ninety-eight-pound weakling's physique, it was never challenged. I had, of course, avoided military service in an entirely different way.

Whale's gaze was already turned back inward, as if my response had barely registered.

"I fought in the Great War," he said.

He fell silent, accessing some profound emotion I could not fathom.

"For a time, it seemed as if we had won. Like we were finally free."

I could not begin to imagine that kind of freedom, now or ever.

"Now there's this air of paranoia beneath the revelry," Whale continued. "Moral panic. The Blacklist. 'Are you now or have you ever been a sexual deviant?'" He shook his head. "Every maudlin old man looks back upon his younger days with a biased eye, but believe me when I say that these are dark times for men like us, Mr. Cole."

I wanted to protest that I was nothing like him, that he didn't know anything about me, but he did, and I was. I also wanted him to keep talking, so I changed the subject instead.

"But you do remember the boy at the party," I said, trying to bring

his focus back to my original question. "Don't you?"

"I remember a group of boys," he said. "Four or five, I think, all wearing the same jackets, though not for long. Everyone ends up naked in the pool eventually, but there was one boy who refused to disrobe. A quiet lad, a bit more reserved than the others. If I recall correctly, he wanted to be driven home, and eventually, someone agreed to take him."

"Try to remember who that could have been," I said.

"It wasn't Fredrick, it was someone older. Ah yes, I remember, it was Bruno. Bruno Sherry." Even I knew who Bruno Sherry was.

"He's married, you know." He spoke that word with an undisguised contempt. "Men like him can do as they please, so long as they maintain plausible deniability."

He paused, gaze drifting over to the young man by the pool. His expression was not one of fondness or desire but rather one of deep, brooding ennui.

"You must excuse me, Mr. Cole," he said, stubbing out his cigarette in an otherwise empty jade ashtray. "I seem to be feeling rather more unwell than I realized. My housekeeper will see you out."

He stood and walked away without another word.

If you were hoping for a Hollywood ending, you have not been paying attention. There is no version of this story in which I, like some rock-jawed matinee hero or relentlessly clever fictional criminologist, bring the murderer to justice. That's not the way things work in the Other Los Angeles.

This is not only because I am fundamentally a coward and terrified of calling attention to myself, although that certainly is a factor. It is also because Adam's ending had already been written by larger forces long before we ever met. Hollywood bigwigs like Bruno Sherry rarely face consequences for their actions. No one cares what happens to shadow-dwelling monsters like us. This is why we must take care of our own in whatever ways we can.

To that end, I made sure that Adam did not go to the crematorium where his unclaimed ashes would be poured into a mass grave with the rest of the forlorn and forgotten dead of Los Angeles. In death, I gave him dignity. I gave him what he could not have in life.

We may never know exactly what motivated Bruno Sherry to perpetrate such a gruesome and heinous mutilation, but I have my suspicions. And as much as I may loathe and fear this kind of frank disclosure, I simply cannot go on without finally acknowledging my most perverse and terrible secret. A secret I suspect you may have already discerned. Regardless, I will do my best to relate the truth to you in a clear and scientific manner.

I am in a unique position to grasp both the precise nature of Adam's injuries and the psychological complexities behind Bruno Sherry's possible reactions when confronted with the unexpected physiological features that the boy and I share.

You see, I intimately understood the nature of this anatomical dissonance even before I removed Adam's bloody shirt to reveal the tightly wrapped binder beneath. When I first examined the body, I knew that I was not looking at a void left behind by the removal of male genitalia, but rather a series of furiously jagged incised wounds to the external female genitalia, exposing the vaginal canal beneath.

For many years, I was certain I was a terrible and singular creature. A monstrous deviant so rare as to be undefined by standard medical textbooks on psychosexual disorders. Despite the fact that my conviction was not shared by those who raised me, I have always known myself to be unquestionably male since childhood. As such, I had always assumed that I would naturally develop an interest in the fairer sex. When the opposite occurred, I was plagued with crushing doubt and confusion. I was so desperate to be perceived as a normal man, but yet felt so fundamentally abnormal that I knew my only hope for survival was to forgo all sexual relations of any kind and devote myself solely to the pursuit of science.

Adam's arrival in my morgue and in my life was evidence that I was not alone. He gave me a strange and terrifying gift, and I wanted to give him something in return.

It was quite easy for me to repair his wounds and correct his anatomical defects. I was able to remove the excess tissue from his chest and give him what I so longed for and knew that I could never have, courtesy of a post-mortem donation from the well-endowed wino who would be headed to the crematorium in his place.

I buried Adam's surgically perfected body in a blue mohair suit made by Marcel, although I lied and told him it was for me. I was able to make it work for Adam with a few strategic pins. The flat granite

headstone I picked out was simple and elegant and when they asked me for his surname, I didn't want to use Tashman, so I gave him my own instead.

You may laugh, but I chose my name when I was still quite young. The last name was admittedly more aspirational than descriptive, and my first name had been inspired by a handsome actor on whom I had an embarrassing fixation at the time. I swear that it was not inspired by the scientist in James Whale's most memorable film, although in retrospect that would not have been entirely inappropriate.

My name is Victor. The grave marker I had made for the boy reads:
Adam Strong, Beloved Brother

I visited Adam often, as he was my only family. I visited him five years later when I read about the lonely suicide of James Whale and shared with him the complex emotions that news evoked in me. I visited him when Bruno Sherry died a wealthy and successful man, surrounded by adoring grandchildren. Whenever the weight of my monstrous secrets became too much to bear, I found solace in the peaceful silence of Adam's grave.

Maybe that's not a Hollywood ending, but it's not an entirely unhappy ending either.