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On Arrival · Fred G. Leebron

LAMARR ONCE ASKED ME, “Why do you straight people come to this city?” And I said, LaMarr, that’s an offensive question. As if we didn’t belong here? And he said, “I didn’t mean it that way. I just have a hard time understanding it, is all.” And the next week his face was slightly ravaged and flushed, his cheeks and the skin around his eyes sagged, and months later his head had shrunk—it seemed to come to a point both at the pate and the chin, like a football—and he lived alone and I would go to see him, a machine purring in the corner, the television on even though he hated television. And he’d say, “So, you have that answer for me yet?” It was supposed to be a joke, and I laughed. But when I left the apartment, was out on the street, I swore I could smell his disease, coming up from the bay and down from the hills, like a fog—a sickly sweet sticky smell. I covered my mouth.

As if I were afraid or believed all the tall tales or was homophobic, as if I were one of the reasons LaMarr had posed his question. He’d been up to Pacific Heights one evening, to a bar—perhaps he said something too obvious, perhaps he touched somebody’s elbow—and he’d been give a bad time, an unpleasant time, was ridiculed, his sweater scissored with ice tongs, and he was driven from the bar. He stood on the sidewalk in the nearly cold night, for here it is rarely cold or hot, and looked up at the stars before he began the walk back over the hill to his apartment. The stars said nothing, and he trudged homeward, the strangely tattered sleeves of his sweater unpleasantly tickling his wrists. “It’s the yuppies,” he told me afterwards. “They’re coming and they’re ruining everything.”

At Christmas on a special television show he played Mary’s father as part of a panel discussion on the moral history of the holiday. It was broadcast at six A.M. —Jill and I got up to watch it. And there was LaMarr in his red shag sweater, his balding hair miraculously ponytailing behind him, discussing the grave difficulties that Joseph and Mary faced, shut out of inns and taverns. “They’d walked ninety miles and she was pregnant,” he said. “The hay of the barn stuck to the blood on her feet.” And I swore I could see it then, on his face, the beginning bone-brittleness of his fingers. “You’re imagining things,” Jill said.

But let's say this were a mainstream disease, you're standing out on the street, and you can smell it. They've got coffins stacked from here to Venus, at dinner parties somebody slumps over and starts to drool—unconscious or merely asleep, no one tells you and everyone insists on not noticing—half the apartments you know of are equipped with at least a respirator and a defibrillator. What would you do then? Would you leave the city that seems like a cemetery around you, or would you stay—and, if so, how would you stay, with a mask on your mouth and latex-gloved hands? Or like a Nightingale with everything but your loins exposed? Where would you go, and why have you come here?

We moved out here for the physical beauty of it, for the diverse culture, the restaurants, the movies, the cafes where you can sit and almost drink the fog. We like to be by large bodies of water. The weather; the weather is also good. And then your first Sunday newspaper arrives, and they post the weekly body count in it. And you begin to swear you can smell it. Perhaps it drives you a little crazy. On that long hot day before the last earthquake, you swore you could smell it—like old peaches rotting in the sun, like the piss some drifter has sprayed on your car. I could smell it like that, and when the quake hit it all seemed only natural, the curse extended. Later a construction crane would fall forty stories, five men would ride it down. A bomb would explode in a car on the freeway. The first someone you know would die. Then the second, the third.

But I'm losing the thread, the thread of LaMarr. He who said he had sex only once a week, who claimed that his gravest mistake was leaving New York twenty-eight years ago, he who developed crushes on all the young men he worked with. He who said of St. Vincent Millay, of the line she wrote about the lost soul, about grabbing at the ankles of a departing lover—that "I was down on the floor grabbing with her." LaMarr.

First he said it was a hernia. Then a bladder problem. And then—well, then he knew and he told it. We stood on the beach of a great sea of mourners and waved to him. He drifted far out, alone and not alone, surrounded and enveloped. And the city a cemetery, a tomb, a desert, a sea of dead and nearly dead, took him.

No one called us or came by. I went into work and there were roses framing the door. I glided down to LaMarr's office. A wreath as big as a casket lay on his desk. Once I spilled water all over my pants and he'd said it

looked as if I'd been beating off. The last two months all he'd talked about was quitting. "My second gravest mistake," he'd said, "is not quitting three years ago." Our lunches together were like that, blue and bitter, the clank of silverware, the smell of ammonia wafting from the hole of the kitchen. Always the same Vietnamese restaurant, always LaMarr would say, "I'm your boss, I'll pay for you." In the afternoons he'd drop a bag of chocolate raisins on my desk. LaMarr the provider. I touched the wreath. It wilted and smelled as sweet as anything I had ever imagined. The picture of his last lover hung on the wall, peeking at me. The memo from the office manager had said, "LaMarr's long-time companion Robert has passed away. Donations can be sent . . ." I didn't contribute. LaMarr didn't take it personally—he didn't even mention it. He was gloomy for about a month, took a lot of sick leave and none of us got paid on time. Beneath the wreath gleamed his house key—the first time I dropped him off, he'd joked, "Baby, do you want to come up? It'll be fun."

Twenty minutes later I was at his apartment, in the middle of the day. The door was flung open, inside a technician worked furiously, crating up the machines, a mask hiding his mouth. He looked at me and pointed at the mask, as if it were an answer to a question I hadn't yet asked or he was going to ask me. I shook my head. He returned to his work. LaMarr had lived in the living room for the last month, to be closer to the television, the front door, and the kitchen. There were sweat stains on the white sofa, flowers on the coffee table with a card that said, "Think of me when you brush your teeth." Out the window spread the city, halted by the ocean and the bay. I touched the window and studied the fingerprint, then studied the city through it. What next? The technician tapped me on the shoulder. "I'm leaving," he said through his mask. "Lock up, will you."

Minutes later I sat at the baby grand, shut inside LaMarr's apartment. "A magnificent piano," he'd said. "It's a shame I never learned how to play." He'd been lying on the sofa bed then, staring at the television, the piano between us. "Come on over here and sit by me." I left the piano to be by him, I sat on the edge of the bed. "Rub my feet," he said. I could barely hear him. I got the lotion from the kitchen counter and started rubbing. His soles were cracked, dry. "Oh, that's wonderful," he said. "That's really wonderful. Could I have a potato chip?" I fetched him a bowl of potato chips. He crunched as I rubbed. "Oh, this is heaven," he said. "This is absolutely heaven."

He used to sing at funerals. It was a good job, he said. He liked it, the sound of his voice over the silence, the quiver of his notes in the grief-stricken air, the ponytail lashing the back of his neck as he sang. He sang like we all sing — with joy and resentment and self-love and rage and love for everybody else. Once we snuck into a funeral to hear him. It shook us. We were far back and it shook us as if the person dead were one of us.