

M+B

VICE

How Kohnstamm Got the Beach House

June 9, 2014
By David Mamet

It was near morning. Margaret and Mel sat, alone, on the couch.

“The weekend the power went out at the Bel Air may have been the most restful of my life,” Mel said.

“As you grow old, various things fade—appetite, I find, increases; but I think this places me in one of two camps.”

“What is the other?” Margaret said.

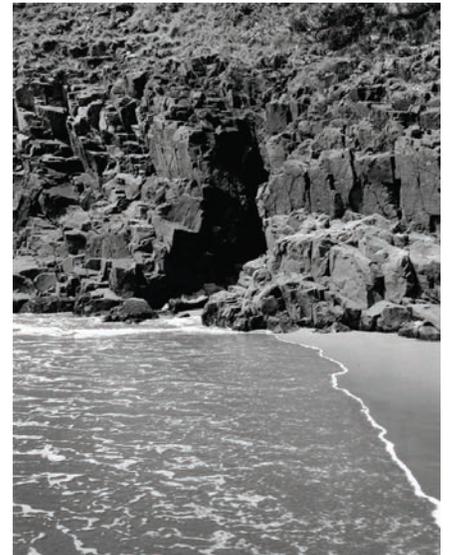
“They grow thin, as they age,” Mel said. “But both, I believe, find a diminishment of sexuality. Perhaps the thin, though, less. I don’t know. You would know, how would you know, you’re half my age.”

“Not exactly,” Margaret said.

“Well...”

“I am ten months your junior,” she said.

“That winter,” he said, “it was raining. As it rains in Southern California, in that idiot-



*Untitled (Beach), 2012, © Whitney Hubbs,
Courtesy M+B Gallery, Los Angeles.*

determined way that everything takes place here. I was at the Bel Air. I had this plan. To begin at dinner that night, and I was lounging, watching the television. Where they warned about flash flooding; and the 405 was out, and the 10 was out, and Sunset was closed, and there went the power. Whole hotel. Whole town. All went quiet and dark. I picked up the phone. The phones were dead. And here this strange calm. Just like that, came over me, such that, looking back, I never even thought, ‘I’m going to miss...’

“I sat on the bed. I smoked a cigarette. I was thrilled, if I may, and I hope you will excuse me, by the silence. And I suppose the word is that I was ‘subsumed,’ if that is the word, by a felling which I later called ‘peace.’”

“I’m going to guess,” Margaret said, “who was meeting you there.”

“No, I don’t think you can,” Mel said.

“It was Molly Brammell.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Mel said.

She nodded. “And the house came down. The, the...”

“Foundation,” Mel said.

M+B

“...and they were in court with the builder. And I’ll tell you how I know, because Slick Kelley, who...”

He nodded.

“You remember,” she said.

“Indeed I do,” he said.

“...who defended him, or whatever the hell you do, when you sue the builder... Slick Kelley, and whatever-happened-to-him, is he died of cancer...”

“I know he did,” Mel said.

“...as fuckin’ horribly,” she said, “as I ever hope to see a human being die.

“When I die, Moogey,” she said.

“I know he did,” Mel said.

“...as fuckin’ horribly,” she said, “as I ever hope to see a human being die.

“When I die, Moogey,” she said.

“...what?” Mel said.

“‘When I die,’ you will remember I began that lugubrious sentence...?”

“I heard you,” Mel said.

“You did not,” she said. “You were off in the past, somewhere. Thinking of some broad you’d had, some broad you’d wronged, some nice broad you did not appreciate: ‘all-old-hags-now-and-what-does-that-make-you?’ such that, in the style of the old, you were missing some short, pathetic, but real moment of the remaining few vouchsafed to you.”

He sat for a while.

“The thing of it is,” he said, “that, that, the true—and it is not the memory, if I may, but the search for the memory, which is the killer.”

She listened quietly.

“Because...” She moved closer to him, on the couch, and took his face in her hands, and turned his head, and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

“Well, then,” he thought, “what was the difference between that and this? Four moments, perhaps, in a life. Or do they only appear in relief, with the weakening of desire?”

“Gain, kill, breed, and then,” he thought.

“But you know,” he said, “it’s what makes the Movies.”

“And there is always,” she said, “the young hopeful from Arkansas to call her up, and lick you all over, stick her tongue up your ass...”

“Yes, but she will not know,” he said, “or what the fuck I’m referring to, however modernistically I pitch my tone.”

M+B

“The girls, in the old days,” Margaret said, “did not, in their day, know a fucking thing. All they did was nod sagely, at given intervals, and dress well. And any man in a good suit could have them.”

The maid came by and refilled Margaret’s marijuana pipe.

“And they would fuck like bunnies,” she said. “Oh, the shame of it all. That they allowed themselves, not merely to lose that flat belly and those pretty, high tits, but to decay and die, one and the same with the overpriced mulch my gardener, whatever the fuck his name is, pours upon the ground. And the ones who didn’t wish they had. Truth to tell.

“Save the exceptional, stoical, philosophic heroes, and I use that term advisedly, and I do include myself, who gazed deeply enough into the pool to make out...”

“...their own face?” Mel suggested.

Margaret shook her head.

“Their own face,” she said, “And, beyond that, the sky. And, beyond that: nothing. Oh, boo, and oh-fucking-hoo.”

She finished tamping down the pipe and nodded to the maid. The maid lit the pipe, and Margaret drew once, twice, and waved the girl away.

“And I’ll tell you who bought the new house on Tigertail...”

“The Sterns...” Mel said.

“Yuh.” She drew again on the pipe. “When they rebuilt. Ten? F’teen years later? When he went to Mexico? She moved out to the Beach? Which was a big fucking mistake. To sell it. ‘Cause she took a beating, and when she came back? She tried to sell the beach house...?” She waved her hand at the wrist, to indicate Mel knew that story.

“But who bought the Tigertail house—and this is something you don’t know—was Charlie Kohnstamm.”

They settled back in the couch, as the maid brought out a tray of fresh coffee.

“All the bigshots, in those days,” she said, “back in the Real Studio days. Back in the blowjob days. They had, as you know, these li’l fuck cottages, in Rustic Canyon. And the parties that went on...”

“I’d been to some of them,” Mel said.

She shook her finger. “Back in the thirties,” she said. “And, I’m saying, before either Law or Custom, and before the War.

“And Kohnstamm, at this juncture,” she said, “was an office boy. He said, or let us infer, that he was somehow ‘muscle,’ or, I don’t know, a dope smuggler...”

“...which he was,” Mel said.

She shook the notion off. “He went, or was sent, now and then, South of the Border, to their Homes down there; where the housekeeper would hand him a ‘can of special coffee,’ for Mister M.”



*Untitled (Hair), 2012, © Whitney Hubbs,
Courtesy M+B Gallery, Los Angeles*

"...but always sharp..." Mel said.

"...please," Margaret said. "Such that. Happened to be. One late night. Down in Rustic Canyon. One late night. He was, I believe, taking the air, in a guest bedroom. Close of a party. He's looking to prune the over-heavy money clips, the luminaries, in their languor, left in their pants, before moseying down to the pool house. And here he is, young Kohnstamm. In the dark. Trips over his employer."

"...with a little boy," Mel said.

"No."

"With an underage girl," Mel said.

"No. With his daughter."

Margaret appreciated Mel's wonder for a moment, and watched the small smile begin at the corner of his mouth.

"And she never said anything?" Mel said.

"Well, no," Margaret said. "It seems that she was safely drugged. In an uncharacteristic act of thoughtfulness on her father's part.

"But Kohnstamm, you see. Saw something other than mere parental probity."

Mel looked down at the coffee table.

"He saw a new world," she said.

She took another deep drag on the marijuana pipe. She began to cough, and Mel moved toward her. She waved him away. He looked down, until she'd finished coughing.

There were small tears at the corner of one eye. She took a cocktail napkin off the coffee tray and wiped them away. Composed, she began her story again.

"All the big shots in those days," she said, "had their fuck cottages. Some of them in Rustic Canyon, some of them were up in Malibu.

"Now, Kohnstamm? To him, this was the epitome of luxury. The 'beach shack,' as they said, or, in our irony-starved day, 'the place at the beach.' And he lusted, as after teenage flesh, for such a beach shack.

"His presence there, among the great, challenged him. For he had sensibilities."

"That he had," Mel said.

"...which is an understatement," Margaret said. "And Hancock Park, the mansion; Bel Air, the Home; Rustic Canyon, Palm Springs? These were nothing to him—but as the Ring to the boxer: an arena.

"He would squire Marcus, Mrs. Marcus, the children, a starlet... He would: arrange a birthday party, fetch the forgotten present, convoy the drugs, or hookers..."

"And while there," Mel said.

"Of course," Margaret said. And many is the platinum watch or bauble, the odd \$50, piece of ass, or case of bubbly which went glimmering in those stately homes. And it was rumored, though I wouldn't say it, that perhaps he aided in this or that less amateur depredation. For he loathed the motherfuckers. With that white hate which we find so seldom, and so shockingly, among our naturally forgiving people."

"He envied them," Mel said.

"I would think. Though, independently, he did, as we know, possess the power to truly, truly hate. And I admired him for it. As it never diminished his marvelous clarity."

She turned her head so slightly, and the maid appeared to refill the demitasse cups.

"You wanna drink?" she said.

"Sure," Mel said.

"But Malibu," Margaret said, "always got to him. As he saw it was the Last Best Place. Remember. There was nothing there. Thirty-eight? Forty? Just before the War? Nothing there. Dunes. A house? Might as well have been on fifteen thousand acres. Dunes. The beach. The sea.

"It was, to the kike, Moogey? To the kike, which is what he had been born, perfection. We forget. I met his mother. At the end? He flew me back. When she was dying. And he took me down. To Rivington Street, and you never saw that look in his eyes, and I mean cold. When he spoke about the tenement. And his love for that old lady? And we went up there. He spoke to her. In Yiddish. And she didn't know where she was, and she thought she was back in Poland. Roosevelt Hospital. She was dying. And he held her."

She cleared her throat.

"And it was me he asked to fly back with him.

"I was honored. It was, of course, a confessional. That he wanted someone to show it to. Who understood it. Before it was all gone."

"But you always understood it," Mel said.

"Of course I did," Margaret said. "Which is why he asked me. Not that; but he desired me; though..." She passed her hands over her body. "...wreck that I am today; I was, as you remember..." He nodded his assent.

"...the fucking fellow," she said.

The maid brought a brandy bottle, and a small glass.

"Just leave it, Mercedes," she said. "That's all."

Mel poured the glass full, and drank it down, and refilled it. Margaret watched him.

"Ruinous. Ruinous," she said. "The things we do. Charlie? He'd always known, his destiny. Was to be a thief. Because, the goyim weren't going to give him a job, had he wanted it; and the yids? How was he going to fight his way in, having nothing?"

"His ambitions were: \$300 in his wallet, a new suit, and a piece of ass."

"It was all front," Mel said.

"Precisely," Margaret said. "Which is the thinking of a luftmensch. Which is what he was. And then," she said, "in two moves. The first, greed, and the second, the second, an act of genius, Moogey, where in an instant, he gave birth to the new thing.

"He comes on Marcus. The Head of the Studio. Fucking his sedated daughter. All right? Marcus. Looks at him. There is no gun. Marcus cannot kill him; Kohnstamm can leave the room. With what he's seen.

"Marcus looks up at him. Conquered. Pleading. 'What do you want?'

"Kohnstamm? For his part? He does not hesitate. 'I want the house in Malibu.' Marcus starts to nod. Hesitates. 'But,' he says, 'how would I explain it?'

"And here it is. Here's what Kohnstamm says: 'You say it goes with the new job.' 'What job?' Marcus asks.

"'You appoint me,' Kohnstamm says, 'new head of the studio.'"

The maid closed the door behind Mel. He walked down the three stone steps and stood in the driveway.

"Where would I be off to now?" he thought.

“Some girl, of course. Or no. I would have brought one to Margaret’s.” She would have fallen asleep on the sofa. In the study. “She’d have waited, at first, of course, while we talked. And then gone off and fallen asleep.

“All the pretty broads there. And would she have been possessive? Anxious, or jealous? No. Not a young one, who had nothing to fear.” And then he would wake them to go home with him. Or he would leave with someone he had picked up at the party.

He walked toward his car. “Two hundred thousand dollars worth of specially tuned and buffed and cosseted metal. And what difference does it make?” he thought. “When it could not be that old convertible, some bathtub Porsche, some Girlfriend Car.”

He stood in the predawn. He felt the ebb of the night come on more quickly, and the approach of the hot day, which, in the desert, as he was, is the time of death. He searched for the efficient cause of his acute nostalgia, and found it was Molly Brammel, and a specific evening, forty years ago, at Margaret’s.

She had been the young girl asleep on the leather couch in what Margaret’s then husband called the Library.

His first memory of her was the curve of her haunch, as she slept, on her side, her mouth slightly open.

He had stood, in the library door, looking at the girl. At the curve of her hip. At her half-open mouth, and he longed to see how sweet her breath was.

She’d woken at his gaze, and turned to sit upright on the couch, looking at him. He did not know who she was, and he doubted that she knew him. He did not know who she had come with, or who would be so foolish as to have left a girl like this alone—for the party was over, and, as usual, he was the last to leave.

Margaret’s husband had gone, as he did, early in the evening, to do whatever he went off to do, leaving Margaret to her friends. And had Kohnstamm been there? He had not, no, he had been in Europe; he had been on someone’s yacht, he had been in Rome, shooting that Epic; he was having an affair with its star, with some countess, with someone’s mistress, in Paris, at the Ritz, in a dive in the Marais, with the girl he’d met in the War; he was in Israel, perhaps, Margaret suggested, with a raised eyebrow meaning no-more-will-be-said; and, so, they had ceased speaking of their Byron, and turned to the true business of their colony, which was, as always, sexual and financial gossip.

These were his favorite times. White nights, in effect, around the campfire, where, as Margaret had said, “all the scant wisdom of the tribe is retold, and its totems aired, and all the usual songs sung.” Which she had said that night, forty years ago. And forty years ago, he remembered, he had seen the girl on the couch, and she had woken up and looked at him. The longest time. While he had thought about nothing.

And then, without conscious intention, he’d heard himself saying, “Get your coat.”

“So long ago,” he thought.

“The usual songs sung,” Margaret had said, venturing, as ever, magnificently close to sentiment. He’d had Tiffany’s put it on a cigarette box. “Here’s an idea,” he thought, “stolen in a robbery. A cigarette box. Years go by. The giver comes upon it in another country. In a pawnshop. How did it get there?” He opened the door of the black car and sat with his feet in the driveway. “And here’s an idea,” he thought, “which is: What difference does it make?”

David Mamet wrote the screenplays for American Buffalo, Glengarry Glen Ross, The Untouchables, The Postman Always Rings Twice, and Wag the Dog, among many others.