MARC TRUJILLO

1053 Burbank Boulevard, 2011
Oil on polyester, 24.5 X 30.75 In

COURTESY: WINFIELD GALLERY

ROBERT KERWIN

Dinny

I was in Hollywood on business and had a few hours before I had to be at the airport, so I walked to Sunset and Vine to see if I could find any trace of the Merry-Go-Round, my uncle's café, or maybe even my uncle. "Sunset and Vine, just near the Brown Derby" is how relatives described it when they returned home from trips to the coast—"all the big famous stars go in there." I'd called my uncle and left a message saying I'd be in town, but of course didn't hear anything from him.

Well, the Brown Derby was still at Sunset and Vine but my uncle's place wasn't. All my life I'd been hearing "Merry-Go-Round, just near the Brown Derby," and from as far back as I can remember, I'd looked forward to seeing the Merry-Go-Round in person some day. But now that I finally got here, it's not here.

I stood wondering if Sunset and Vine ever did have the Merry-Go-Round on it, "just near the Brown Derby," or if all the stories brought back by my relatives had, like everything else, been a bunch of family bull.

After I'd finished goosenecking and squinting, determining who were the stars adjacent to the Roosevelt Hotel (Irving Thalberg, Lily Pons, and Walter "Woody Woodpecker" Lantz), I resumed my casual stance in the alcove; then, as I searched along the boulevard traffic for the shuttle back to the airport, I saw an approaching figure that, despite the years, I recognized.

That's right: it was my famous uncle, the star of our family, from the Merry-Go-Round, "Sunset and Vine, just near the Brown Derby."

My uncle had been eyeing the pavement as if looking for dropped coins, and immediately—though I hadn't seen him since I was a boy—I recognized in his walk my posture, my attitude, my walk. When he reached the alcove he looked in as I looked out.

My uncle turned away quickly. But too late. I caught him, caught our family's crafty eyes, the hairline, brow, nose, and jaw of my father, same as that of my grandfather from the photo on our mantelpiece back home. My uncle, when our eyes met, held the shocked expression of not having been prepared for me materializing here on Hollywood Boulevard, of having been caught unawares. His corrupt, scared, yellowed eyes heightened as they met mine, displaying that fleeting out-of-control expression that I know so well—that look of panic that was part real, part act. In

Think of it: here we are, out on the coast, far from where we both got started, and he—my blood uncle, the star of our family—is doing his best to put serious distance between us.

my uncle's face I saw my own face reading the shock in my face as I read the shock in his.

For a split second I caught a glimpse of honesty, of recognition. I knew the glimpse: our family's crafty eyes momentarily disarmed; a shine to them, a happy, pathetic, hopeful, dashed, sorrowful recognition of family and what family meant and what family ought to mean, but in our case never came up to it. In my uncle's eyes I saw a recognition of us back there, back then, and of us here and now. I caught the guilt in his expression, too, my uncle already feeling shame for not even intending to recognize me, for intending to look through me, pretend he didn't know who I was, and keep moving.

That's the beauty part. I knew what my uncle would do before he did it. Same as I would do under similar circumstances, and in precisely the same manner. Put it like this: if I were my uncle walking Hollywood Boulevard and came upon me in an alcove, I would have gotten rid of me, too, even avoided eye contact altogether.

In our family, we were pros at this. I was raised on getting rid of. That was our way. Somebody comes to the door—"get rid of him"; somebody calls on the telephone—"get rid of her"; somebody stays nosing around on the front porch for too long—"get rid of them people."

After recognizing me, my uncle hardly broke stride. He recovered fast and moved on. Before he got away, however, my arm rose instinctively, and before I could stop it, my arm was extended out of the alcove, pointing a question, my voice issuing out across the Walk of Fame: "Dennis?"

There he goes, his arms churning like a power walker's, propelling him away. As he slithered into a crowd at the corner, I scrambled out of the alcove and cried a demand at the back of his yellow cardigan: "Dennis!"

Though he wasn't exactly sprinting, Uncle Dennis (as old as he was) was doing a commendable job of leaving me behind, employing an ambling, round-shouldered, ape-like power walk, the same sort of evasion job I would do if fleeing a relative, the same as my father (who taught me how) would have done, too. As I chased Dennis, I heard my father's voice in a semiconfidential aside to me, the child (we're out for a stroll, and along toward us comes the unwanted—relative or otherwise): "Keep walking, son. Pay no attention. Let these people go."

With my hands cupped to my mouth, I boomed it down Hollywood Boulevard: "Uncle Dennis! You're my uncle Dennis!"

He dodged between two women with shopping bags who were waiting for a light to change, then he made the mistake of looking over his shoulder—like an animal—the eyes questioning, seemingly unsure of whom he was running away from, trying to determine if I really could be his relative—and what was I doing out on the coast?

He won't get away with this. I'm going to chase this bozo, catch him, and find out what's going on. Think of it: here we are, out on the coast, far from where we both got started, and he—my blood uncle, the star of our family—is doing his best to put serious distance between us. What the hell's going on?

It's not as if we didn't know each other.

Whenever Uncle Dennis came home from the coast (usually to attend a family funeral and find out if anything had been left him in a will), there was huge anticipation: "Dinny is coming! Dinny is coming in from California!"

For weeks in advance of his arrival, there were all sorts of carryings-on about the coast and the famous movie stars who frequented Dinny's café. All you heard from morning until night, as the family spread the news to neighbors up and down our block, was "Merry-Go-Round, Sunset and Vine, just near the Brown Derby."

When Uncle Dennis finally stepped off the Super Chief, he looked to us like a movie star himself, let alone him knowing all the stars and them frequenting his cafe. It was always wintertime when Dennis came back to the old neighborhood, and he was forever dressed in California clothes and sporting a California suntan. You wouldn't believe the cut of his hair: not clippered tightly like ours by a tobacco-chewing barber here in our neighborhood, but styled by a genuine Hollywood stylist out on the coast, Uncle Dennis's hairstyle looking like the hairstyle of a movie star; looking also as if his hair had come that way, had grown and shaped itself naturally to the condition it was in, and that Uncle Dennis hadn't had anything false or unnatural done to it in any way at all.

Every family has its star, and Uncle Dennis was ours. Star athlete at school, star of the neighborhood sandlots, better at everything than anybody in our family—leaving somebody like my father pitifully far to the rear.

We'd all go to Union Station to meet Dennis's train, and as he clambered off the sleek Super Chief, dressed and tanned, and looking the way he looked—not just the way he looked, but everything about him: the people he knew, the place where he lived, the life he led, how sure he was of himself—there were times when, God forgive me, I wished he were my father instead of the father I already had.

When Dennis returned from the war, he looked at what he'd come from and left straightaway for the coast. He managed minor league ball teams out there, got married a couple of times, went into the wholesale sporting goods business, then the next thing we heard he'd opened his own nightclub, the "Merry-Go-Round, Sunset and Vine, just near the Brown Derby."

When Malibu began to be colonized, Dinny opened another place on Pacific Coast Highway, called Seacomber. "It's kind of Hawaiian, South Seas–looking," said my aunt when she came back from a visit. "All the big stars are in Malibu now."

The last I'd heard of Dinny (I was in high school at the time) was that he and his third wife—"she's a beautician for one of the big studios"—were managing "a lovely little restaurant, a coffee-shop-like, attached to a big motor hotel on Highland Avenue, just near the Hollywood Bowl."

"DENNIS!" I bellowed down Hollywood Boulevard. He was in a gallop now, pedestrians were backing off to have a look—first at Dinny, then at me in hot pursuit—as if they'd been caught up in some chase scene, real or make-believe. Dinny, far up ahead, was jerking along mechanically in his power walk, like a doll.

For Dinny this was old stuff. He'd been running from gambling creditors, summons servers, mortgage repo agents, and every other claimant since long before he'd left home. He was an evasion pro, better than anybody in our family at not answering doorbells, craftier at peeking through pulled-aside drapes, a pro at absconding through rear doors and scampering down fire escapes. Early on, for telephone purposes, Dinny had perfected a Filipino accent which my father told me was a beautiful thing to hear: "Mister Dennis he no home. Mister Dennis he go Hilo Hawaii."

I chased, as the Walk of Fame's stars raced past me forward backward forward in streaks of black and pink, with flashes of gold.

When I caught up with Uncle Dennis, he was leaning against a newsstand, winded, trying to shrink out of sight, at the same time pretending to fish in his pocket for newspaper change, even though he already had a newspaper tucked under his arm. When I came face to face with him, he feigned a smiling surprise of discovery (exactly what I would have done under the circumstances).

He looked fairly clean; he'd had a recent shave and haircut, his shirt and slacks had been pressed, and his shoes were in moderately good shape. But seeing him up close now—so jaded, so out of breath—Dinny looked terribly small to me: bent and tired and insignificant. Old, and finished.

"Uncle Dennis, it's me," I said, smiling a family smile—a true one, not our crafty bullshit smile. I was about to add, "I'm your brother's son," but held it back.

"Yes…" Dinny cringed like an animal about to be smacked. His voice, eyes, face, his whole shrinking body curled away from me, a hand darting beneath the cardigan, shoving the newspaper up under his arm.

"I knew it was you, Uncle Dennis. What do you make of this! I'm standing in front of the Hollywood Roosevelt, I look up and—"

"Yes." Dinny nodded nervously. "Uh-huh."

"So…"

"So… So when did you get here?"

"A couple of hours ago."

"Oh. And, uh, how long will you be in town?"

"Only for the day. I was just on the way out."

"Oh. Uh-huh."

I smiled big and genuine. "Uncle Dennis, how have you been? I haven't seen you in such a long time."

"Oh, I been fine."

"It's really good to see you, do you know that?"

Dinny's expression remained unchanged, his face and eyes still showing blank as he asked, "Uh, how's the family?"

"Fine," I said. "Everybody's fine."

"Good." Dinny gave the newspaper a push into his armpit. "That's good."

I was somewhat curious as to where Uncle Dennis was living these days and what he was doing with himself. I wanted to tell him to relax, for Christ's sake, that I didn't have any plans to go out anywhere with him, to have drinks or dinner, or to stay at his house or anything like that. No. I just wanted to let him know that the only reason I chased him was because he was my uncle. "You're my uncle, Uncle Dennis," that's all I wanted to say to him. And to tell him that I chased him in order to say "We're family."

I said nothing.

Buses and cars fumed by, Hollywood types pushed past the newsstand. The news vendor, who had a hard gritty face and wore a dirty cap and a dirty string apron, handed pennies in change to a bent-over man who was schlepping grocery bags, and slapped a paper beneath the man's arm.

After a long silent pause I said, "Well, I've got to be going now."

Dinny's mouth dropped open in fake disappointment. He said, "Oh. Uh-huh."

"It's really nice to see you."

"Yes. Give my regards to the family."

Our eyes met. Dinny's came up from the pavement, and across his face spread the look of family once more. We were blood, Dennis and I, we were connected, from back there, no matter—or in spite of—what was happening today, here, now. We were family no matter how you looked at it, Dennis and I, just family, that's all. And now it was time to go.

We smiled thinly and backed off from one another.

As I recrossed the street I felt an urge to look behind to see if Dennis was still lingering by the newsstand and perhaps following me with his eyes, or whether he was walking away, his back turned. I wondered if Dennis could possibly be feeling the urgency that I was feeling to look back, and if Dennis was being tempted, too, to stop for a moment, turn to see if I had stopped and turned and was looking to see him.

I didn't look back; I don't know whether Dennis did or not. Soon I was lost in the crowd, and it wasn't long before Hollywood Boulevard and the Walk of Fame went back to where it had been before Dennis or I ever came on the scene.

Robert Kerwin's celebrity profiles, essays, short stories, and travel and op-ed pieces have appeared in *Playboy, Cosmopolitan, Travel & Leisure, Ellipsis, Chicago Quarterly Review, The New York Times, The Washington Post, Chicago Tribune Magazine,* and *Los Angeles Times Calendar,* among others. Born in Chicago, he received a BS in Journalism from the University of Illinois, and he later attended University College Dublin, Ireland, as a graduate student reading English Literature. He now lives in northern California and most recently has been working on a memoir, *All to Myself Alone.*

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