

PETER  
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I am the most illegitimate child of Peter Lorre.

Between his second and third marriages – the third of which produced the only offspring you've heard of, the sad-starred girl whose name was misspelled on her gravestone, may she rest in peace next to her bridegroom, both dead before thirty-five, may it please the Hollywood morbographers – my old dad met my old mom and produced me, his only (to my knowledge, which isn't perfect, as he was a prodigious womanmeeter etc.) biracial progeny. Miscegenation wasn't yet cool then – assuming it is now or was subsequently, which I'd have to say it probably is, one or the other – and even a Hungarian Jewish Holocaust exile wasn't about to go lighting up the newswires with the breadth of his carnal appetites. Even more so because my dear mother, G-d rest her soul and weary bones, found her gainful employment at Scotty's Garage. Yes, that famous place. She always told me – why would she lie to me about it if she was bothering to tell me that she'd worked there, which I would never have known had she not – she wasn't there to serve the customers, though Lord knows that's why dad and Tracy and Hepburn and Leigh would visit (dad said Leigh was the hardest to satisfy, just guy after guy after guy in rough trade, bipolar up and down and up and . . . well, you know) – no no, she was there to clean the stalls. Yes, can you believe it? Dad went down to the tightest little hide-inplain-sight brothel for a pick-me-up and caught glimpse of this skinny sip of Other and seduced her – mom liked to tell me she'd been willing, he was exotic-looking and could have peeled the hard off a destroyer's hull with that sultry buttercup voice – and they had a hot time affair for some two or three weeks, and then he was gone, but I filled the void.

The last time I saw my dad was October 21st, 1954.

He was already married to Number Three by then, but he was still coming around to see us or letting us visit him at a park or at his work or once at his house while the official family was out doing what they were doing. Number Three figured it out pretty fast, and that night was the last straw, I guess.

The story is that dad invited mom to bring me over to the CBS studios in Television City to watch him shoot. It was a new show, the third episode of Climax!, which was a fast hit in the days when mysteries and thrillers were still undifferentiated. Every story was different, with changing, unconnected characters, and it was presented by a dapper host, the way shows all were back then, because audiences benefitted from some light mood-setting in the day. The name of this host was William Lundigan, and I remember him because he opened the show by introducing a gambling shoe, and because he later ran for LA City Council once and lost.

I was definitely little, four years old, but I can remember a lot from that evening, scenes and images and exchanges and feelings, of course, and what I can't remember I've filled in by thinking about it a lot, you know how it is with important days in your life. Dad would let on in those moments – or he'd let it be let on, and then he wouldn't correct anyone – that my mother was his maid and that I was her son. Probably some people believed it, and probably most didn't, but in any event it allowed mostly everyone to be nice to me. On the set they'd give me soda and ice cream, and makeup would style my hair and paint scary wounds on my face. I would sit on the director's chair sometimes and hold the slate and watch the scenes being shot if I was very, very quiet, which I was. To me, a sound stage was obviously a place where important adult things were happening, and I remember having so much fun being super quiet and observant in the middle of the people scurrying and running and moving and then being totally motionless while the lights blazed and the actors said their lines, and my dad right in the middle of it.

That night was even more intense than usual. I think I can remember feeling it, but it could be one of those recovered things. It makes sense that the set would have been electric. Climax! was one of those shows that was filmed and broadcast live for TV. They don't do that any more – there's no reason to – but back then it was part of the theater. Imagine if they filmed Game of Thrones live like an NFL game. Just about every little thing would get fucked up. All the pieces have to move just so, in this and that time, like a giant ballet. On the CBS lot that evening, the whole machine was whirring and buzzing and clanking like a steamship boiler.

To top it off, Number Three was there that night, toting my half-sister, who wasn't yet eighteen months old. One of the memories I'm surest of is her raven dark head of hair sitting on top of a grimace that twisted up from her chin through a clamped mouth toward wild eyes roving me and my mom up and down, all the way to a forehead cinching fissures into her skin from which no anti-aging creme could ever gift recovery. I remember that particularly, her eyes, which wouldn't stop moving. They kept darting up and down and from side to side as they caught me and mom and looked around at the scene and then back at us, every inch, every parcel. Over the years it occurred to me that I'd made that up, the darting, quivering, focusingunfocusing eyes. It wasn't until many years later when I saw footage of Idi Amin that I accepted that I hadn't been inventing it. If you look at him in newsreels, even though the rest of him might be still, his eyes shiver and shake like a gyroscope. When I saw that – it must have been some time in the 70s – I was instantly overcome with clarity and gratitude. It was a huge relief to see it for myself and to know that what I'd seen that day at Television City was real. She was holding her baby in her arms, the little tush in the crook of her elbow. The baby kept reaching for daddy and yapping some words. Number Three would shove the girl into dad's chest, never taking her eyes off us, and he'd hold her for a minute, and then some other person preparing for the evening's filming would come up to him and stick a brush in his hair or some paint on his face or a different kind of hat on his head, and he'd hand the girl back to Number Three, and the daughter would make some noise, and, just as soon as she could, Number Three'd hand her right back to short, fat dad, with those eyeballs roving all over us like pebbles ricocheting down a mountain, and all dad could do was to keep taking the girl and handing her back like a vaudeville banana man.

All we could do, mom and me, was stand there in another part of the sound stage looking on while Number Three and daughter stood right next to the biggest star on the lot, while the light and people and very world revolved around him.

There was no way the baby girl was going to be allowed to stay on the set that night. She was giggly and talkative and squirmy and generally not yet eighteen months old, so what the hell could she be doing staying on a live broadcast sound stage once the cameras got rolling. Besides, the hour would grow late soon, and she would grow cranky. There was no way.

Well, at some point, Number Three made a gesture toward me and mom with her chin and finally her finger, and I saw dad try a roly poly gleeful “who me what?” kind of face, one of those deflection techniques bigger than life people and actors try to pull off and which usually allow people who don’t want to believe something to disbelieve what their eyes are telling them. But hell no not this woman. She just got more steamed up. All of a sudden, she wheeled on him and gave him a hardy punch in the lower left of his back, deep into his flesh, where he had a few things going wrong as it was. Then she stomped out toward the green room, where she stayed with the baby till the end of the night. She left him standing there, his hand reaching back to tender the blow, his spine crunched over so his costume hat fell off his head, and his face contorted in pain like it was at the end of M.

Right after that, the director or second assistant called “places!” and another one called “quiet on the set!” and dad had to shuffle to his spot. He couldn’t even bend over to pick up his hat. A young production assistant grabbed it for him, and wardrobe came over and dusted it off and placed it back on his head with a smile, and dad tried to smile back. Nearly everyone around the place had seen Number Three throw him the kidney sucker, and I guess I could probably estimate that just about all of them had figured why. The mood had changed as soon as his hat had struck the floor, and the set had fallen quiet while Number Three clacked her heels across the concrete floor and out into the backstages. I could be making this up, but I think the director even said “focus! focus! showtime!” as his crew rallied everyone into position.

Before you knew it, Climax! was ready to roll with the episode, but the cast and crew were rattled. They did those jittery things people do when the cause of the tension is past but the tension is not yet broken, like tell short jokes and make faces and pop bubble gum too loud.

You can see from the film of that night what an effect the flap with Number Three had on the whole shoot. Fifty minutes long, and the only thing that was well executed was the commercials.

Here’s Clarence Leiter – yes, I said Clarence Leiter, not Felix Leiter, they changed that, and they spelled it Letter in the credits – a British (you heard me) agent introducing the most famous character in global spydom in his first ever

screen appearance as “Card Sense Jimmy Bond.” Did you get that? Card Sense Jimmy Bond. If you watch the tape, you can see the fucking actor improv the line. Never mind that Jimmy Bond on Climax! is an American, played by a cardboard cutout matinee type from the time. Never mind that they make tricky intel op René Mathis into Bond’s old flame Valerie Mathis, and never mind that she picks up on it and calls him “Jimmy” in the broadcast, too. But Jimmy Fucking Bond! Card Sense Jimmy Bond!

The action of the play unfolds in a casino. But not because they got that part of the Bond canon right. It’s because of my dad’s role. He was Le Chiffre. Good old British gumshoe Clarence Leiter discreetly describes him to Jimmy Bond to build the suspense. He’s a “toad like creature, the chief Soviet agent for this area,” which is probably Monte Carlo. “And he’s the most dangerous man they’ve ever had,” he says. “He’s a fanatic. He’s ruthless, incorruptible, and everything he does is entirely legal.”

Then they show my dad, five foot three, pale and flaccid and looking beat up and processed and injected like a foie grass ant hill, his face revealing a terror of missing his cues or his lines or his cue cards or his family and destined shortly to blow every single one. As if the writers had watched Maltese Falcon and confused Cairo with Spade and Gutman, they had the Leiter fellow continue to describe my old dad Le Chiffre: “He’s tough, he’s good with a gun, he carries three razor blades, for slashing purposes, there’s one in his hat band, there’s one in the heel of his left shoe, one in his cigarette case.” As if. The only part they got right was toad like. What was left of his body was fatty acid and morphine. He stumbled around the set with his mouth dripping out the words he could barely read from the prompts. The central device was the one you know – Le Chiffre’s only weakness was gambling, and he needed to bet high to recover the losses he’d incurred with official Soviet funds. Well, from the way dad played it, you’d think Le Chiffre had been shooting Chivas and morphine for hours in the high roller suite because he knew from his cortex to his gallstones that his entire life was about to collapse.

I watched the play get filmed, and then my dad halfwalked, half limped, holding his side with one hand and his chest with the other, off set and toward the green room. I guess I probably tried to run over to him, and I guess my mom held me back, but I could be making up that part. I just remember that I didn’t get to say goodbye. My mom took me by the hand and put me in the car that my dad had bought for us, and then the young production assistant ran over and knocked on the window. My mom opened it, and he showed me my dad’s costume hat and then put it on my head with a smile and said “you look perfect, just like Le Chiffre.” I remember taking the hat off just to check and having mixed feelings that there was no razor blade in the band. I wondered if it was the same exact hat he’d had on during the shoot or if it was a fake.