

The Backside of Nowhere

by Alec Clayton

Excerpt from opening chapter

Water, Water

David Lawrence's many fans were surprised when he began performing his monologue, *Water, Water*, which ran six months Off Broadway before becoming a surprise hit on DVD. It showed that the popular actor had a subtle and sardonic genius and a depth of feeling that few fans and even fewer critics suspected. In his monologue, David Lawrence rants, "You know what I love about being a movie star? The money." And then, after a wink and a dramatic pause, "You know what I hate about it? Just about every damn thing else."

The audience laughs. On cue or spontaneously, it's hard to tell. Or is it canned laughter? The camera zooms in for a close-up. David runs his hand across his closely-cropped hair and says with a strong Southern accent (just a trace of Cajun), "Jesus, man. If y'all think you'd like to be a movie star, let me tell you, it ain't all it's cracked up to be." And he winks wickedly at the camera while projected behind him are films of David with his girlfriend, the actress Jasmine Jones. The obvious implication is that if making it with Jasmine Jones is a fringe benefit of being a movie star, then being a movie star is the greatest gig on earth, his protestations to the contrary notwithstanding.

The montage quickly flashes a love scene from their film *The Witness*, followed by a photo of them speeding along an Oceanside highway in his Jaguar and a blurred shot of them skinny-dipping in the surf. David and Jasmine met on his first picture, and the gossip rags have dogged their every move since. They're hot in the tabloids. They're together, they're not together, she's moving in with him, she wants to have his baby, they split up, he's seen with another hot young movie star, now they're back together.

David has three smash hit movies to his credit, *The Witness*, *Travlin' Light* and *Cold Justice*. In all three films he is the lovable but somewhat bumbling Southern lawyer Raymond Moon, who wins his cases by sheer good luck and gets the girl in the end. Teenage girls idolize David for his rugged looks and older women for his quiet manner. David says he doesn't like Hollywood parties, and he doesn't like going on talk shows, and he doesn't like reporters and photographers. But most of all he hates that the roles he plays are not the roles he envisioned when he studied acting in college. He wanted to do serious drama on Broadway. So far he hasn't been able to realize that dream, but he feels he has come close with his monologue.

In the monologue he talks a little bit about his life as a movie star, but mostly it's his story of growing up in the little town of Freedom in the bayou country near the Gulf of Mexico. As soon as the DVD hit the stores, David's mother bought a copy. (He had told her he would send her an advance copy, but he never did, and she wasn't willing to wait. "That boy would forget his own wedding if he ever had one," she liked to tell anyone who would listen, "and God

knows I wish he would—have a wedding, that is, not forget it.”) Shelly Lawrence didn’t like the idea of her only son living in sin, although even she would be the first to admit that concept was old fashioned.

The whole Lawrence family plus David’s old high school sweetheart, Sue Ellen Patterson, gather together to watch the DVD of *Water, Water*. There’s David’s father, Earl Ray, called Pop by almost everyone. Seventy years old and still strong, but nothing like in his youth when he lifted barrels of beer and loaded them on a flatbed truck, Pop is a magisterial figure with waves of silver hair and a neatly-trimmed goatee. He stretches his six-foot-six frame in an old recliner in front of the TV. Seated next to him is his wife, David’s mother, Shelly, who at five-foot-four looks like a child next to Earl Ray. Seated on the couch and sharing a bowl of popcorn are David’s beautiful sister Melissa and his not-quite-as-beautiful sister Mary, with Sue Ellen between them with the popcorn bowl perched on her lap. The three of them look enough alike that people often mistake them for sisters. All three are tall and statuesque with voluptuous figures and regal manners. Melissa is by far the most striking, but she works at it, always looking her best, even when relaxing with family. Her hair is thick and brushed to a lustrous sheen. Even now she’s wearing lipstick and mascara, diamonds around her neck and on her fingers, gray cotton hip huggers that cling to her ass, and a little white tank top. When she gets up to go into the kitchen for a drink tantalizing bits of a colorful tattoo can be seen on the small of her back, and when she sits back down more hints of skin art peek out from her deep cleavage.

Sue Ellen’s style is more conventional business casual, looking like she’s just come from a board meeting but has shed her jacket. Her hair is shoulder length and she wears glasses. A loose blouse hides much of a figure that in the right clothes could rival Melissa’s.

Of the three, Mary is the most casual. Dressed in ripped jeans and a simple plaid blouse, just as she was while cleaning house and cooking dinner that afternoon, she obviously feels no need to impress anyone.

Sprawled on an easy chair with his legs thrown across the arm is Mary’s no-count husband, Buddy Boudreau. (It’s Mary herself who insists on referring to him as no-count, usually following up with variations on the refrain: “but I love him nevertheless. He’s like a bad puppy that’s always piddling on the floor but he’s so damn cute you can’t stay mad at him. Ya know what I mean?”)

Perched on the rug on their bellies with feet kicking in air and chins cupped in hands are Mary and Buddy’s pre-teen daughters who are the envy of every kid at school because they are David Lawrence’s nieces. Of course that envy is somewhat baseless because Patricia and Rhonda have never even met their famous uncle.

David opens the monologue with a quote from *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*:

Water, water, every where,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, every where,
Nor any drop to drink.

The very deep did rot: O Christ!
That ever this should be!
Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy sea.

The girls go “Eeeych!”