

Tropicana Motel
(Formerly of) 8585 Santa Monica Boulevard, West Hollywood
James Fox

In 1979, author James Fox began work on *White Mischief*, his revelatory and fascinating exploration into the adulterous lives of Kenya's Happy Valley set – specifically the 1941 murder of notorious womaniser Lord Erroll, killed by a single bullet early one morning in a suburb of Nairobi. With his battered Olivetti Lettera 32, the typewriter that had accompanied Fox on reporting assignments from South Africa to Vietnam, he arrived at the Tropicana – a dive motel in Los Angeles with budget rates for writers – to begin work on his debut. Here, exclusively for *AnOther Magazine*, Fox recalls those few months at the Tropicana, living amongst the punk bands, roller skaters, drifters and dreamers that called it home.

Fox's most recent book has gathered critical acclaim and placed him top of best-seller lists around the world: he is the ghost writer of good friend and Rolling Stone Keith Richards' electrifying autobiography, *Life*.

When I looked at a photograph of the Tropicana Motel – the first time I'd seen its image for 30 years – I got an excited seizure, a racing feeling, as if I could walk into the homey reception area and step back into its forgiving embrace. I could feel the morning heat coming off the pavement, remember that crack in the road across the tramline. The Tropicana was like a space station – cocooned in your cream and green room, with its kitchen area and pool view, you were removed from earth and all its responsibilities.

I went there in 1979 for the first time, having graduated downwards from the *Sunset Marquis* – because now I was on my own. I had a book to write and had left salaried employment in newspapers, which had nurtured me from the ages of 18 to 32. So I needed a writer's place and the Tropicana was \$22 a night for a poolside room, and \$100 a week for selected writers, recommendations required. The pool these rooms looked onto was kidney-shaped and painted black to conceal decay, a pool into which one resident would take his pet snake to swim for exercise. It was around that pool and its green Astroturf that those scenes from *Andy Warhol's Heat* were shot – the quintessential movie of 70s LA, Paul Morrissey's remake of *Sunset Boulevard*.

It was affordable. In fact rent-wise you could live there as if you were renting a cheap apartment, and many people did, notably the resident bard, Tom Waits, who left the Tropicana late in 1979, after four years in a bungalow at the back. He was then at the height – or the depth – of a heavy drinking period. But his companion who came in and out was Rickie Lee Jones, surely the coolest thing on two legs. She had just recorded her first, self-titled album. Laila Nabulsi, muse and companion to Hunter Thompson, remembers a party for the newly formed Blues Brothers at the Tropicana around this time. She recalls “literally stepping over Tom Waits to get into the car. He was lying in the gutter. John Belushi said, ‘That's

fucking Tom Waits.’ I said, ‘Do you need a ride?’ ‘Naaaw,’ Waits drawled from the gutter. But then of course he lived there.” When Tom Waits had moved in, in 1975, it was \$9 a night. He was quoted as saying in an interview in 1999, “I don't think I got any new towels for the whole like nine years I was there. But I never asked. I didn't wanna upset anybody.” In fact that was the joy of the Tropicana; you were nannied, as you are in most hotels, but the nannies didn't mind if you didn't emerge for days, or kept your curtains drawn, or they never got in to clean. All kinds of behaviour were tolerated, according to a Blind Eye policy, and a zero disapproval rate, unless you wrecked the place or a fight broke out. Excitement, gratification, scoring cocaine, music around the corner, the Roxy, the Whisky a Gogo, the Troubadour... I don't know how I returned from that *Odyssey*, the traps were so seductive, except to say that it all had to stop. A while later God said, “You will do your work on water from now on.”

The motel, a two storey clapboard building with rooms along a white balustraded terrace enclosing the kidney-shaped pool felt flimsy, and cheap, but it was cosy and you had an extraordinary degree of privacy even in that relatively small area. Maybe this was because the itinerant bands partied elsewhere and came here to flop, or the punk bands would get back at 5am and sleep most of the day. Breakfast at *Dukes* – the café attached to the motel – was a table-waving centre of the world of rock and roll, because everybody of the period, at one time, came to the Tropicana.

In its earliest incarnation it was a flophouse for travelling salesmen, Californian Willy Lomans. In the 60s, it got a reputation for housing travelling bands and roadies, who could hole up in their cars, rent-free, in the parking lot. Jim Morrison lived there from 1966 to 1969 and it gradually took on its last identity as a musicians' hotel. In 1979 when I indulged in my lost weeks at the Tropicana, new wave and punk was still strong – out of town bands came through the Tropicana – The Dead Boys, The Ramones, Iggy Pop, The New York Dolls, the Cramps, the Clash and Blondie, whose *Parallel Lines* was the epic record on my new ghetto blaster (stolen from the hotel through the flimsy fly screen in the back window and instantly replaced with another one – no extravagance too great to stay connected to *Picture This* or *Heart of Glass*.) Alice Cooper had stayed here, and because of Warhol, Nico.

I first went there as the “guest” – since introductions helped to get the writer's rate – of Hercules Bellville, a man whose name was put in inverted commas in a history of the 60s, as if it was scarcely believable that such people existed and would have existed in that time. Hercules, my dear friend who died only a year ago, was as his obituary in the *Guardian* described him, “one of the most extraordinary and best loved characters in the parade of European and American cinema

of the last 40 years.” Even then, in the late 70s, he had deep and abiding friendships with Roman Polanski, Jack Nicholson, Jonathan Demme, Bob Rafelson, Bernardo Bertolucci and Michelangelo Antonioni. His first job in the movies was working with Polanski on *Repulsion* in 1964. None of them spent much time, if any, at the Tropicana. It was, after all, a dump. The Santa Monica Boulevard at this point was seedy, run down, but in Hercules’s sharp aesthetic eye, it was a stage set, a preserved leftover of the style of the 50s, even of the real Hollywood of the 30s and 40s. He thought he’d struck gold when he discovered it in the early 70s and his enthusiasm was contagious.

Hercules was working then on Hal Ashby’s *Being There* and about to work on Bob Rafelson’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, as a producer. He had one of the cabins in the back of the hotel, which had two living rooms. He’d decorated it with his extraordinary collection of fruit labels, pop art, “ephemera and esoterica” as he called it. Through Hercules I – we, because I was with my already second wife – hired a cheap Rent-a-Wreck from a garage nearby. You had the pick of all the flashiest dying models, and Hercules, who was a serious fan of architecture insisted that you must have a convertible, so you didn’t miss the sights. I chose a massive convertible Cadillac Coupe de Ville with a wide shark grille that turned all driving into blissful glides across the city. I was all set up in paradise. This was the writer’s life. And I must have got some writing done, because that particular book, *White Mischief*, was written quite fast.

On Mondays in that period we went roller skating at the invitation – much sought after – of Helena Kallianiotis at the rink she’d hire in the San Bernardino Valley. Helena, who had started out as a belly dancer, had become a cultishly popular actress, appearing in *Five Easy Pieces* with Jack Nicholson, but she had made her name as the angry roller derby skater Jackie Burdette in *The Kansas City Bomber*. We’d go up there with all the groovy people and skate round and round and round this oval wooden rink, round and round until blistered feet could take no more. I remember the song of the time at that rink, the big song: Rod Stewart singing “Do Ya Think I’m Sexy?” And also disco – the new sound.

What did we eat? We didn’t eat; we couldn’t eat. But we’d try sushi, which had just been invented, or takeaway or we’d go to Schwab’s on Sunset or Musso and Frank’s and try to force some nourishment down. The marching power was always accessible and always high quality, these still being the days of almost cottage industry production. I remember running out and being a little anxious for supplies. Where was the runner? “Oh they probably stopped off in an adult motel,” said the dealer, as if that was what one did.

An earlier part of that trip – a quite fruitful work period – I shared with the writer Francis Wyndham, my close friend, whom I had known first at *The Sunday Times*. Now in his 80s, he has had a new success d’estime in France where his books *The Other Garden* and *Mrs Henderson and Other Stories* have been translated and republished. Not only a writer of

rare and original gifts, he’s also written into literary history for his mentoring, discovering and encouraging of other writers from Jean Rhys to VS Naipaul to Bruce Chatwin, all of whom acknowledge him in their books. In my own case, I probably would never have written a word without his encouragement. But at that time he was grieving for his mother; her death had set him back into a deep depression some weeks earlier and it seemed that a spell in the Tropicana, where I could keep him company, might do him good. He appeared, when he arrived, almost immobilised by grief, an affliction, of course, well accommodated to the inertia of the Tropicana. Nothing was further from his interests or abilities than roller skating, but I took him to the rink, and he felt a little better for an evening, watching all those people going monotonously round in circles, waving to each other. Later a strange thing befell him. A bad smell began to pervade his room. It smelled of decomposition; very like a dead rat, and one deader by the day. Unable to contemplate moving rooms because of his paralysis, he tried to ignore it, then to deny it; when it got really bad, instead of complaining, which would have meant relocating, he decided that the smell was coming from him – therefore it was not the fault of the room or the hotel. Nothing I could say would persuade him that he should move away from the dead rat. This rationalisation and evasion went on for some time until, on the tip off of the maid, I presumed, he was moved by the sympathetic management.

The Tropicana was finally demolished in 1987, and replaced by a Ramada Inn. Duke’s coffee shop relocated to 8909 Sunset Boulevard, where, apparently, you can still buy a T-shirt that says “Duke’s at the Tropicana”. I’m glad it’s gone. I wouldn’t like to see that paradise hobbled and shackled to a new age of accountancy and intolerance. There are still the two cultural flophouses trading on their past, the Chateau Marmont down the road, and the Chelsea Hotel in New York. But to me the Tropicana is twinned in history with more modest places of refuge like the Hotel de la Louisiane in the Rue de Seine in Paris, home to many writers and painters in the 30s and in post-war Paris, including Cyril Connolly and Lucian Freud. “...Hotel Jacob for wasting much time; Hotel de Savoie, Hotel Delambre, central heated Stations of the Cross: names that stir the lees within me,” wrote Connolly in *The Unquiet Grave*. In London in the 70s there was Blakes Hotel, the original incarnation, and the circular room at the Portobello Hotel, both of which I associate with actress Maria Schneider because I visited her in both establishments, once in the nick of time to extinguish a fire started by one of her cigarettes. “I am for the intricacy of Europe,” wrote Connolly, “the discrete and many folded strata of the old world, the past, the North, the world of ideas. I am for the Hotel de la Louisiane.” And I for the Tropicana, late of Santa Monica Boulevard and the new world, the only one of all these hotels that no longer exists, its many folded strata having last appeared only as a heap under the wrecking ball.