

15 MINUTES TO FAME

The Life of Harvey Wilkes

Leon Mintz

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Leon Mintz
Visit my website at www.erieharbor.com

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Pelting rain showered the background. The peal of thunder told of lingering danger. Wind chimes rang out, pushed by the driving storm. The brooding weather mumbled out a chaotic song.

DAAA DA-DAAA DA DAAA DA-DAAA. DAAA DA-DAAA DA DAAA DA-DAAA.

“Is this ‘Riders on the Storm’ by the Doors?” called out a voice in a deep Southern accent.

I came to attention as if corrected by an ear-twisting sister. Frozen, I sat there. The pen rolled from my jittery fingertips. My eyes slowly shifted in the direction of the voice, but my head didn’t move. Stationed down in a dingy basement of a mental hospital, I saw few coworkers even during the daytime hours.

Man, I don’t need to be busted doodling on the nightshift. I just started here.

I relaxed as I spotted a grinning middle-aged man behind the floor-to-ceiling security fence. He wore dull-colored pajamas, the ones issued to all the patients here at the West Tennessee Asylum near Bolivar, Tennessee. His fingers curled like crow’s claws on the thick black-coated chain-link gate. His head swayed side to side with the soft, soothing song.

DAAA DA-DAAA DA DAAA DA-DAAA. DAAA DA-DAAA DA DAAA DA-DAAA.

Briefly, the moment felt like a dream. Slowly, I glanced at my surroundings as if that would dispel the reverie. Stacks of files and papers that I had been sorting earlier covered the large cherry-stained desk that I sat behind. My eyes fell to the floor. Scuff marks marred the center tiles, showing the years of traffic, while mildew crept out of the corners where the two hallways met to form my open-ended station. The flickering fluorescent lights did little to conceal the decay in the old wing where I worked. If anything, their dull light and low hissing intensified its sad state.

As the rain continued to splash down in the speakers, I noticed the song playing for the first time. And though the small flashing clock radio sat within reach, I couldn’t say what song had just finished playing. I heard the music but wasn’t listening to it. It had been just another boring night at the asylum as a glorified gatekeeper.

“Shit, naw!” the man bellowed. “They still can’t be playin’ this. Hell, I remember hearin’ this for the first time on my AM radio back in late seventy-one, just before . . .”

An ominous stare overcame his eyes like black holes in a blood-red sky. His thoughts consumed him, then the moment passed and he began swaying and dancing to the music again. The man behind the security fence seemed harmless, but no one dressed in pajamas and slippers seemed too intimidating. Watching a grown man behave this way entertained me. Though his actions were not erratic, they weren’t normal for a man his age. As if slipping back in his life to the time of the music, a young man emerged and surfed on the waves of his youth.

He looked like my cousin’s neighbor, Mr. Thompson, in Bolivar. Both men only had a strip of wiry smoky-black hair that ran from ear to ear. With their hair long,

unkempt, and standing out in every direction, they appeared to have more of it than what they did. Their potbellies pushed out the front of their half-buttoned-up tops.

“Yeah, that’s the Doors,” I stated.

The man danced on, bobbing his head to the rhythm. His eyes remained closed.

He called out, “This has to be one of the greatest things I ever did hear. Probably ever will. Ya know what I mean, boy?”

Stopping suddenly as if the music was over, the man stared at me, stared through me. A dark, murky mist hung in his untamed eyes like London fog hiding a night ripper. An uneasiness slithered through me.

Perched in place, he crowed, “They just don’t make music like that anymore. I haven’t heard anything new in years.”

Chuckling, I said, “That’s because Jim’s dead. The Doors broke up back in the ‘70’s.”

“I know that,” the man sneered. “Whatcha think, I’m crazy?”

“You’re here, aren’t ya?”

“So are you. Does that make you crazy, too?” he fired back.

Caught off guard by his sharp remark, I paused, then said, “Sure feels like it sometimes.”

My reply disarmed the man, and his stern stare vanished as if it was never there.

He has some wild mood swings. Man, I don’t need to be talking to this guy. How can I end this conversation?

Breaking eye contact, I gathered the spread-out papers in front of me. In a time-consuming manner, I tapped the ends of the loosely held papers against the desk. As I tried to drift back into my work, the man stared at me. A month ago when I’d hired in, Martha Johnson, my supervisor, had told me that some patients got up through the night and that I should ignore them if they weren’t causing trouble. This was the first time I’d had to deal with a patient up past their curfew.

I wondered if my radio was too loud, so I reached over and turned down the volume. Then, I hole-punched some papers, tabbed them and inserted them into a file. Afterwards, I noted the report on the file’s table of contents.

Loud and impossible to ignore, the man bellowed, “Damn. You’re just like the rest of them, ain’tcha, boy? I thought you’d be different, ya listening to that music and all. Butcha ain’t.” He shook his head disappointedly.

I slowly turned in his direction and our eyes locked. His eyes glared like those of an untamed dog. Almost losing my nerve, I intensified my stare. He snarled. I needed to take things one step further.

“Sir, I’m sorry, but you must go back to bed,” I ordered. “You’re up past the curfew. I don’t want to have you restrained, but I will.”

“Oh, lookie here. I try to have a simple conversation and ya wanna silence me. They’ve gotten to ya, too. What lies have they told ya?” he asked as his fingers clung to the gate.

“Mister, I don’t know who they are, and I don’t wanna know. I’m only working with you psychos because I was too smart for my own good and didn’t apply myself in school.”

“What makes ya think anything has changed?” He smiled.

“I’m warning you, mister.”

“So am I. Hell, ya still don’t know whatcha want to do with your life,” he observed. “You’re just one more know-it-all, lost soul from Generation Drift and Die.”

The man smiled like a jackal and then laughed like a hyena. Fuming, I said nothing. Quickly, he added, “Oh! Oh! I’m sorry. This ain’t funny, now is it?”

The man let go of the cage door, stepped back and gave a servile bow.

“It’ll be al’ight. What’s your name, kid?”

“It’s not your concern.”

“Okay, Harvey. Or should I call you Mr. Wilkes, since you are a working man?”

“How do you know my–” I stopped as his eyes dropped down to my plastic badge while his smile widened. I boiled.

“I know. I know. Ya don’t have to tell me. I’m leavin’. I wouldn’t want your world fallin’ apart on my account.” He smirked.

The man stepped into the shadows of the long, dark hallway. After a few steps, he stood there with his back to me.

Loudly, he called out, “Do yourself a favor, boy, and go to the public library.”

“What for?”

A sharp, short laugh pealed from his lips, then he declared, “Beside the free education ya can get there, ya can see that I ain’t always been crazy. I’m a victim of circumstances, ya see. Maybe then I’ll help ya make something out of yourself. That’s if ya show me some respect.”

“How do you figure that will happen?”

“You’ll learn who I am, and with a little imagination, ya might figure out the rest. My name is George Leslie. Look me up,” he said as he disappeared into the shadows.

Suddenly, something entered my peripheral vision. Turning from the security fence, I stared down the hallway that led to the elevators, and for a moment, I thought I saw something shamle across the far end like a rat, but moving upright.

Seeing it triggered an old memory. I shook my head and laughed as I thought about a campfire story I had heard when I was a kid. It was the legend of Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac and the curse of Detroit. As I replayed the tale, a vision of the Nain Rouge appeared just as I had imagined the beast when I was young. Grinning with a mouthful of jagged teeth, the red dwarf had a cold, glassy stare, ready to wreak havoc.

The thought of that thing snatching me had kept me up the night I'd heard the story. Legend had this destructive imp receiving ill treatment from Cadillac, the founder of Detroit. For this slight, the demon of the strait cursed the city with massacres, massive fires, and brutal blizzards. It had been years since I had thought of Nain Rouge, but now the red dwarf vividly filled my mind. Slowly I drifted back to my filing and finished out my shift, then headed home.

The next three days I had off. On the last morning, I drifted out of an empty sleep. A nagging warmth blanketed me. My hand tried to brush away the suffocating heat but couldn't. At that moment, I wondered if I had to work that day. Dread soured my stomach. Already, the new job wore on me. I hated the thought of waking up every day to go there. Every shift, the four-story dark-brick asylum waited ominously for me. Built in the late nineteenth century, it stood like a rectangular fortress on the well-manicured lawn. A tall, straight tree rose up at each of its gabled ends. A protruding portico and flush steeple marked the center. The pristine grounds hid the human disease and decay within the sanitarium. Each time I entered that place, the smell sickened me. Though smoking had been banned there, stale smoke and piss had seeped into the establishment long ago. The walls would have to be ripped out to remove the faint stench that always seemed to linger. Even now, the smell seemed to cling to me here at home.

I tried to imagine how I could get beyond the nine-to-five grind but struggled to come up with a single legal option. Since graduating, I had been drifting through life as I had done in school. Good grades had come easy, and I had gotten in the habit of just doing enough to get by.

Looking back at my life, I wished I hadn't been an only kid. Each parent tried to appease my every demand. I had learned quickly how to get what I wanted, and I'd been fucked up ever since. At first, after the bad divorce, I'd lived with Mother. She worked for a growing company based in Texas and clocked long hours. I had too much freedom after we left my hometown of Erie Harbor, Michigan, and relocated to Dallas, where I had finished out high school.

The company Mother worked for owned the machine shop in Michigan where Pops had worked. In an act of downsizing, Mother's employer closed Pops's shop less than a year after the divorce. This was beyond coincidence for my father. "The Grassy Knoll" conspiracy of JFK or the eerie similarities between Kennedy's and Lincoln's deaths had nothing on Pops's issues with Mother, Texas, and Corporate America. After losing his old job, Pops had never been the same. He moved to Tennessee to live with my cousin, and now he stockpiled beer and smoked cigarettes like a wood-burner in winter.

Last year, Mother's company had opened an office in Mexico City, and we'd moved again. Mexico might be cool to visit, but it was no place to live, not for me

anyway. So, this spring, I'd settled in at my cousin's home with no clue as to what I wanted to do. It troubled me that some crazy could tell that from a single conversation.

Still lying in bed, I rolled over and pressed the pillow against my eyes to block out the sun. Then, I slipped off into a vivid dream. Ginger Maxwell, a high school senior who worked part-time at the asylum, appeared. Lust raced through me.

Her soft brown eyes peered at me with schoolgirl hunger. Her tiny lips begged to be kissed again and again. My finger ran down her soft cheek and across her narrow chin. Her slick brown hair dangled behind her head in a tight ponytail. Her tiny ears lay naked. With whispered words of love, Ginger's moist white lace panties dropped past her ankles. She moaned with delight.

Drawn in by her lips, I suddenly lost my breath. I struggled as she clung to me. With nightmarish intensity, a new scene swept over me. A wedding band sat on my left hand while a haggard-looking Ginger wore one, too. She held a fussing newborn while a three-year-old girl ran stumbling circles around her in our cramped living room.

For God's sake, I'm still wearing the white orderly uniform with my name badge. No!

Downsizing at the asylum weighed on me. My life slowed to a painful crawl as I drew closer to securing my pension. I felt nauseated at the thought of being fired before that happened. Fickle daughters, a stay-at-home wife and a dead-end job sickened my once-erotic dream.

Uncertainty choked me. I struggled to breathe. Snapping upright, I woke up sweaty. My heart raced. The intense dream had made me jittery.

Twenty years in the blink of an eye. A bad life in fast forward.

The thought of being at the asylum for that long troubled me. Already in my first month, I'd seen many disturbing things. It wasn't just the patients' behavior. I'd expected the worst from them, but not the employer and employees. The asylum rotted from the inside out. Health and building code violations should have closed the facility years ago. Each day I saw in the files how the patients were victimized by society, diseases, and their own minds. When Pops and Turtle, my cousin, had asked if this bothered me, I expressed my issues with it, but this "cordial outrage" did not stir me to action. I had no desire to be a psychologist. There was no future there; the asylum was just a paycheck to me. I knew I didn't want to deal with other people's problems.

We cause most of our own grief, so it's up to us to sort our own shit out. It pains me that more people don't see this. I guess that just confirms that I have more brains than most and more common sense than the rest. Hah.

Whatever the case, that dream had me spinning. As I stewed on it, I thought about my weekend of partying—paid on Thursday and penniless on Sunday. I had to change my ways, or I wouldn't have any money saved for the fall semester. I wasn't too sure how bad I wanted to go to college, anyway. For the last couple of weeks, I'd

said I would register but hadn't yet. Sipping my coffee, I grumbled over my lack of options and, for the first time, thought of George Leslie.

What could be so important at the library?

Within three hours after finding out that the library in Jackson, Tennessee was open, I had returned with a book by George Leslie and another about him. The library had two books that George Leslie had authored, but only one was available for checkout. I brought home *Hell Has No Bounds* since someone else had *The Last American Hero*.

According to the card catalog, *The Last American Hero* was a western that began before the Civil War and ended after the cattle busts in the late 1800s. *Hell Has No Bounds* took place during the same time period but had nothing else in common with the earlier title. Instead, a Southern plantation owner and ancient vampire, Colonel Marshall Kohlman, was the central character in *Hell Has No Bounds*. Also, I checked out *American Horror Writers of the 20th Century* by Kathy Truman. Her book consisted of bios, with George Leslie's being one of them.

As I relaxed in the house alone, I picked up *American Horror Writers of the 20th Century*. The entries were in alphabetical order. I turned toward the middle of the book and easily found the large section dedicated to Stephen King. Flipping further, I went straight into the bio about H.P. Lovecraft. Stopping, I turned back through the pages. George Leslie's listing appeared on the left side of the open book. There was just a single-page bio with a small black-and-white photo in the upper left corner.

George Leslie came from a prominent Southern family with deep roots in northwestern Mississippi, near the tiny town of Delta Springs. He grew up on a plantation that had been in his family since before the Civil War. His family had acquired and retained much wealth over the years. Going on extravagant trips to Cairo and other exotic places, though, George had quickly put strains on a family's assets that had easily weathered the Great Depression.

In the summer of '65, George Leslie's first child was born a bastard to a woman named Victoria, allegedly the maid at Leslie Estates. Though the sole heir to his ailing father, T. Howard Leslie III, George had to marry Victoria or face being disinherited. The marriage seemed to have a good effect on George, since he had finished two novels before his son's first birthday. The second title came out months after *The Last American Hero* had hit the shelves.

Later on, as his son, Howard, reached the age of four, George had two more titles in print. This did not mean that George had attained much success. In fact, George's fourth novel failed to sell, leaving the bookstores when the vendors pulled it to make room for selling titles. George Leslie had taken a fresh idea for an early frontier story, *The Last American Hero*, and drained it dry with three poorly prepared follow-ups.

George Leslie became more erratic. He disappeared on a trip in the Amazon. His capsized boat and some of his crew's half-eaten bodies littered the river. Nearly a year later, though, the authorities picked him up wandering the dusty roads of Arizona. When George was gone, many things had happened. His publisher, with the help of his wife, had released a collection of George's short stories.

While away, George Leslie had penned his only best seller. And with it, he shifted his theme from American frontier adventures to bloodthirsty vampires. *Hell Has No Bounds* put George at the forefront of modern-day vampire writers, the same class that Stephen King, Anne Rice and Brian Lumley emerged from years later. Unfortunately, like his western series, the follow-up to *Hell Has No Bounds* flopped. Instead of poor quality killing the sales, it was the explicit material and graphic violence that kept it from going mainstream.

In his second vampire book, Colonel Marshall Kohlman moved to Germany after the end of World War I. People of power and prestige gravitated to the three-thousand-year-old vampire. Nearing the end of a fifty-two-year cycle, Kohlman had to physically transfer his vampiric essence into a new host, and he chose Adolf Hitler. Leslie had stirred up bitter memories that the public did not want to buy. George had financially backed the production and marketing of this book himself, selling off much of his family's holdings, hoping for sales that never materialized.

Compounding matters, in late 1971, Victoria Leslie gave birth to a baby that had been conceived just before George was picked up in Arizona. Shortly thereafter, he massacred his family—his wife, her two boys and his bedridden father. George even mutilated the family's cats, saying they spied on him for Father. After a lengthy trial, the court had committed him to a hospital for the criminally insane in 1973. Transferred to various facilities in the South over the years, George Leslie had been institutionalized for nearly twenty-seven years.

I closed the book and set it down. The short bio held more detail than I'd thought possible. The write-up gave the impression of being penned by someone keenly aware of George's life. Slightly unnerved but definitely intrigued, my mind raced. First, picturing Mr. Thompson in the dull-colored pajamas, I struggled with the idea of George being a killer. Then, I thought of Jack Nicholson's portrayal of the crazy writer, Jack Torrance, in *The Shining* and I was less skeptical. Oddly, both George and Mr. Thompson looked much like Nicholson.

Maybe George is claiming to be someone he's not, like when someone claims to be Henry the VIII, Napoleon, or even Christ. But why would he pick some obscure occult writer?

As I sat there, I picked up *Hell Has No Bounds*. I looked the book over, first flipping open the front cover, then turning to the back. As I did, I saw a younger, thinner version of the man at the asylum. It was the same picture in the other book, just bigger, clearer and in color.

Captivated, I started reading the thick novel. Only a few pages into it, though, the kitchen door flew open. Pops and Turtle barged into the house stumbling drunk and talking loudly. I glanced at them as they paraded by, carrying cases of Pabst Blue Ribbon to Pops's room.

More for the stockpile.

As their good spirits marched back and forth through the living room, I struggled to retain what I was reading. So after finishing the page I was on, I stopped, stood up, and walked to my room with the book in my hand. Closing the door to the outside world, I read the long book until I went to sleep late that night.

The next morning, I went to the asylum for my scheduled shift. Working days, I lacked a lot of free time, but I ended up in the records room on the first floor. Finding George Leslie's file, I went to the copying machine and duplicated everything, including the handwritten notes that I struggled to read. I would have been in serious trouble—most likely fired—if I was caught making unauthorized copies of his records. It felt worth the risk.

Soon, voices came down the hallway. My heart dropped into my stomach and my sweat turned ice cold. After jamming the loose records through the prongs in the file, I snatched up my copies and the original. Going to the file basket, I placed the original in the cart, then exited the room in the opposite direction of the approaching personnel. My palms felt clammy. My eyes darted back and forth as I glanced at everyone. I took slow deep breaths to calm down. Wariness prodded me forward like a cop's nightstick to my back.

Were there cameras in the file room? Hell, I didn't even bother to check.

Too late to think about that now, Slick.

Calm down, Dick. Half the people passing by are carrying something in their hands, everything from clipboards, to files, to some sort of medical device. I have no reason to feel edgy. That'll only attract attention. Shit, I just need to relax.

But it was me that got caught painting Old Man Hayes's culvert on Devil's Night.

Mother raised hell that night.

I struggled to calm myself, but I couldn't. I was no criminal. Without a hitch, I made it to my locker and placed the copies inside. I wasn't sure what I was going to learn about George Leslie, but I was glad I'd done what I had. He had stoked my curiosity, and I wanted to find out what made him tick.

I waited at the elevator so I could head to my station in the basement. As the doors opened, Ginger Maxwell exited; she smiled in passing. When I entered and the doors shut, I wondered for the first time how Victoria Leslie fit into the picture. If the bio was correct, George hadn't wanted to marry her, but his father had forced him. Trapped in a family he didn't want, George was looking for a way out. His disappearance for nearly a year proved that. And when he came back and Victoria was pregnant the second time, George knew Victoria was fucking around on him.

Suddenly, a dark train of thought rolled toward a man capable of murder.
