

Cours de Ph. Romanski

So I didn't pass out, exactly. I didn't lose consciousness. But I have no memory of getting back to the Wilders' apartment. They must have taken pity on me, realized that I was in no state to find my way to the hostel by myself. I suppose there must have been a cab ride, and then a ride up in the elevator, but I don't remember any of that. The next thing I knew it was morning. California sunshine was pouring into their sitting room, muted and filtered by a half-open Venetian blind, and I was lying scrunched up on a couch that wasn't really big enough to accommodate a horizontal human body, and my back was killing me and my head was throbbing and my eyelids were not at all in the mood to open.

There were noises coming from another room and at first I thought it must be Audrey so with a tremendous effort I got up to talk to her. But it wasn't Audrey. It was a middle-aged woman in a maid's uniform who was wiping down the kitchen surfaces.

'Good morning,' she said. 'You must be the Greek lady.'

I nodded and said: 'Is Audrey here? Or Billy?'

'Mr Wilder has gone to his office to work with Mr Diamond. Mrs Wilder

had an appointment with her ophthalmologist this morning. She told me to fix you some breakfast, so if you'd just like to go next door, I'll bring you something shortly.'

I mumbled my thanks and went back into the sitting room, which had a dining table in dark oak at one end. The apartment seemed rather small but this was because it was so cluttered. Almost every inch of every wall was covered with paintings: modern paintings, mostly, lots of abstracts and lots of nudes. It was not until many years later that I realized Mr Wilder was a serious art collector – one of the most respected in the United States – and that many of the paintings on the walls were original Schieles, Klimts and Picassos. There was also a large number of books (in several languages) and gramophone records (classical music and jazz), and several Oscar statuettes.

The maid came in with a silver tray on which was arranged coffee, pastries, jams and orange juice. She poured me some strong black coffee and I thanked her before drinking it eagerly. As I sat down at the dining table, she handed me a book. It was called *Crowned Heads*, and was written by an author I hadn't heard of, Thomas Tryon.

'Mr Wilder put a note for you inside,' she said, and left me to read it.

The note was written on thick, cream-coloured paper, headed with the name *BILLY WILDER* in discreet capitals. At the bottom of the paper was a printed address, but no telephone number. I assumed this was the address of the apartment I was in, although it wasn't.

The note said:

You probably don't remember, but last night you solved a story problem for us. This is the property Mr Diamond and I are trying to adapt. I'm lending you my copy, in case you find time to read it and have any more strokes of genius.

Warm regards, Billy.

PS Drink lots of coffee and take lots of aspirin.

Jonathan Coe, *Mr Wilder and Me* (2020)