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The Kick The Bucket Tour

by

Jo Perry

The light turned red while the driver regaled her passengers with details of Ramon Novarro’s torture murder. That’s why the Kick-The-Bucket Tour’s roofless matte-black van lurched so late from Laurel Canyon, where Novarro lived, into the tangle of westbound traffic on Sunset and forced a motorcycle cop to swerve into the next lane.

“Those familiar with the grisly murder scene report that Novarro’s ghost still haunts the property.”

Oops, the driver thinks, regarding the cop. I just massively fucked up.

The driver tilts her oversized Afro-wig-haloed head and blows a lip-glossed I’m-so-sorry kiss at the cop, then purrs into her mic, “And here, folks is a member of the famous LAPD!”

The sun-scorched, jet-lagged, disoriented tourists wave obligingly at the grim-faced officer.

“Never say I don’t love you,” the driver coos, “Ain’t no mountain high enough, baby!”

The cop waves, then guns it up Sunset.

The tourists laugh.

They’ll laugh at fucking anything, the driver thinks, remembering to arrange her mouth into a smile.

She was wrong about the stupid Diana Ross costume the tour now required, she thinks. It works. So does Raymon Navarro. What the hell is wrong with them? Can’t they tell when they’re being played? And don’t people get murdered or off themselves wherever the fuck they live?

The driver slides the van into the No Parking zone, emergency lights flashing.

“On your left is 8024 Sunset Boulevard, once Schwab’s Pharmacy where Lana Turner was discovered.” Lana Turner was discovered downing a soda at the Top Hat Café, but whenever she doesn’t say “Schwab’s,” a passenger “corrects” her.

“And on your right, the infamous Chateau Marmont––”

The driver compensates for the way the speakers slur her words by over-enunciating, “––designed by William Douglas Lee in 1929 and modeled on an actual royal chateau in the Loire Valley of France.”

The passengers gape at the actual faux chateau.

The driver glances at the tip jar, empty except for the five one dollar bills she put there herself, and at the bottles of water and container of hard candies she purchased with a maxed-out credit card and to which she’s invited the van’s guests to help themselves.

“Do any of you wonderful folks know who kicked the bucket at the Chateau?”

“F. Scott Fitzgerald?” a woman offers. The woman is so fat that her flesh appears to melt from her small head and pool around her massive red ankles.

“Close––really close!” The driver closes one heavily masacaraed and false eyelashed eye into a game show wink. “Are you by any chance a librarian, Ma’am?”

The fat woman nods.

“A librarian, I knew it! And where are you from, ma’am?”

“Wichita, Kansas.”

“Let’s hear it for librarians and for Kansas!” the driver says, then waits for the idiotic clapping to subside.

She gets three or four librarians a week. They all love homicides and gore.

“F. Scott Fitzgerald almost died here,” the driver offers. “He had a heart attack at the hotel. And a heart attack killed him a year later not far from here on Laurel Avenue in West Hollywood. You might say Hollywood broke his heart.”

The tourists shift in their seats. They don’t care about deaths from natural causes. That’s not why they paid sixty-five bucks to Kick The Bucket Tours.

“Comedian John Belushi died of a massive overdose in a Chateau bungalow on March 5, 1982 after Cathy Evelyn Smith injected him repeatedly with a mixture of heroin and cocaine called a ‘speedball.’”

The driver silently counts to three, then utters, “What a waste of a hugely talented life.”

The tourists squint into the blistering, white-hot afternoon, conjuring the victim’s final moments and contemplating the senseless but somehow satisfying cruelty and horror of his demise.

The speedball always shuts them up. Now what?

A twinge traverses the right lower quadrant of the driver’s belly.

I’m not getting my period early am I? Great. Just great.

As car after car refuses to let the van enter the surging traffic, the driver touches the iPad on the seat, which causes the theme from “The Blues Brothers” to blast across the van.

Then recalling what her boss told her just this morning about “guests” complaining that she played too much music, she mutes the soundtrack.

“Lots of other juicy things have occurred at this outré Hollywood landmark,” she says. “James Dean jumped through one of the hotel windows during his audition for ‘Rebel Without a Cause…”

Approving murmurs.

“And rumor has it that Dennis Hopper hosted orgies on the hotel premises––“ the driver pauses while titters ripple through the group, “––no wonder they have soundproof walls––too bad they’re so strong, though––famed director Helmut Newton died after crashing his car into the hotel.”

A sudden opening and the driver jerks the van onto Sunset, almost flattening a homeless woman pushing a mutt in a baby stroller across Marmont Lane.

The driver is not herself today.

Maybe it’s the Santa Ana winds slicing fronds from the palms, overturning trashcans and gusting so oven-hot that the driver’s wig has gone from itching to scalding.

Yet the resolute driver powers onward, transporting her charges from one lurid-death locale to another until the melted silver mirages over which the she navigates threaten to engulf her and the van.

“Welcome to 722 North Elm Drive, ladies and gentlemen.”

The tourists stare at the huge Spanish-style house almost exactly like the other Spanish-style mansions nearby.

“Did you know that this peaceful-looking home, the ill-fated Menendez family’s opulent estate, was previously owned by none other than Elton John?”

Why did I say “none other”? I sound like an ass. Get it together, girl, she tells herself.

“Or that their horrific murders were so incredibly violent that Kitty’s and Joe’s bodies were unrecognizable?”

Gasps all around.

Good.

One of these days I’m just going to drive to random houses and make shit up, the driver promises herself. I’ll invent horrific murders of people who never existed. How much you want to bet that no one will even know the difference?

She’s been working the murder/suicide tour for six months now, and besides being a total happiness-sucking downer, it’s changed her. Even the bustling afternoon Trader Joe’s parking lot feels like the scene of a rape-murder to her. Every tree is a suicide tree. Every wavering a shadow, a killer.

The traffic is horrendous. Was there an accident?

There’s always an accident.

But the tourists use the slowdowns to refresh their sunscreen or to help themselves to water and candy as they, like diners between sumptuous courses, contentedly await the next thrilling intimation of mortality.

Finally––a fatal collision between a delivery truck and a motorcyclist has caused a nasty bottleneck––the van rolls to a dignified stop across from a row nondescript houses.

“Welcome to 3831 South Norton Avenue. Perhaps the darkest place in the dark and murderous dark heart of Los Angeles.”

Oohs.

“The place where the grotesquely posed body of young and beautiful Elizabeth Short, also known as The Black Dahlia, was discovered by an unsuspecting housewife on a sunny January morning in 1947.”

Was it sunny? Cloudy? Maybe there was a fucking tornado. Who gives a shit?

“Her fiendish and savage killer has never been found,” the driver says, hinting that the surgically-adept psycho killer will hop aboard to murder and pose them all any second now.

Another strategic pause, then, “Did you know the victim had been surgically bisected and that all the blood had been drained from her body?

Aahs.

The blood thing. Always a hit.

As the driver steers toward Koreatown, the ache behind her forehead blooms into a massive premenstrual migraine, and the twinge morphs into abdominal cramping.

“3400 Wilshire. The glamorous Mediterranean and Art Deco Ambassador Hotel and Cocoanut Grove nightclub, the site of six Academy Award ceremonies, and the spot where Hollywood’s greatest stars performed and hung out. Robert Kennedy was tragically shot and killed here in June 1968. The hotel closed in 1989 and was demolished in 2006. The pantry where Kennedy was shot, however, was deconstructed and is now kept in storage.”

The tourists ogle the brutalist modern school buildings now occupying the site.

“Sirhan Sirhan was Kennedy’s killer, but witnesses reported seeing a man and a woman in a polka dot dress running from the hotel kitchen.” Pause. “Who were they? Were they involved with Kennedy’s assassination? No one knows.”

A few murmurs. Nothing more. Shit.

She’s got to do better. Keep the shocks coming.

A seething wind-burst rakes the passenger’s heads and parches the driver’s throat as she rehearses Peg Entwistle’s suicide by hanging from the Hollywood sign’s H; George Reeve’s Benedict Canyon suicide––or murder––; Natalie’s Wood’s drowning; Marvin Gaye’s death at the hands of his father; Bob Crane’s bludgeoning; the shooting of Rebecca Schaffer; the severed head of Bronson Canyon; Phil Hartman’s murder; Haing Ngor’s Chinatown execution; and the grotesque death of Canadian tourist Elisa Lam whose body was found in the Cecil Hotel’s rooftop water tank.

“How did Elisa Lam’s body find its way into the tank?” the driver intones.

Maybe she’d fucking had it, the driver thinks. Maybe she threw herself in.

The van glides past the white-walled 12305 Helena Drive in whose bedroom Marilyn Monroe overdosed; past the Petersen Automotive Museum on Wilshire where the Notorious B.I.G. was gunned down.

The black van proceeds west, then north.

“810 Linden Drive, where mobster Bugsy Siegel was murdered. Four fatal shots were fired that night in 1947, one of which blew an eye right out of Siegel’s head.”

Gasps.

Then1527 Benedict Canyon.

“Speaking of mobsters, this is where mob daughter and writer Susan Berman died in a gangland style hit allegedly at the hands of her best friend, Robert Durst.”

A few coughs.

These lumps aren’t interested in Susan Berman or allegedly anything, the driver realizes. Durst maybe––the cross-dressing thing is good––but not his not-beautiful and not-rich victim.

The iPad plays “Dead Man’s Curve” as the driver describes the lethal stretch of Mulholland Drive memorialized by Jan and Dean.

I’d murder for a latte and a pee, she thinks. I have that Laugh Factory audition tonight, too. Why tonight? When I feel like crap? When I look like shit?

The driver is actually quite attractive. Beautiful, even. And hers is pretty solid stand-up routine––the usual fish-out-of-water, Midwestern black girl comes to L.A. schtick–– but she’s worked in some good jokes about the murder tour that make it fresh.

The driver halts at a stop sign when the heat or lack of humidity or a mysterious and malignant force bears down on her until she can hardly breathe.

Something has to happen, she thinks. Or else. Something big.

She’s exhausted the inheritance she’d received when her childless aunt died. She’s behind on the rent of her studio apartment and the tour pays only minimum wage plus tips. Forget eating.

If I don’t make it soon, the driver realizes, if I don’t score an improv gig or steady atmosphere work on a network show, I’ll end up like those crazy losers selling selfies in Hollywood.

She could go home.

A tear accompanies the thought, sliding down her cheekbone and taking blush with it, then evaporating before it reaches her chin.

Returning to Springfield would mean defeat. Would demonstrate that she was nothing special, no different from the people she hauled around in the van, would prove that her intuition her destiny was something astonishing was just an illusion.

That she would never be famous.

And she needed to be famous.

Fuck it, she thinks then. Fuck the Hillside Stranglers. Fuck Whitney Huston, Bonnie Lee Bakely. Fuck Fatty Arbuckle and fuck the tourists.

The driver wills her lungs to suck in a long, cleansing breath.

Today is the first day of the rest of my life, she exhales and reminds herself, then urges the van forward and activates Diana Ross’s Greatest Hits.

I believe in you, her inner voice insists. Someday everyone will know who you are.

Reinvigorated, the driver croons into the mic, “We’ve arrived at 3301 Waverly Drive, the site of one of the Manson Family’s most demonic and gruesome murders.”

She’d used “horrific,” but while flossing her teeth this morning “demonic” popped into her head.

So much better!

“Leno and Rosemary La Bianca. Leno was a supermarket executive. Rosemary owned a dress shop. On August 10, 1969 former homecoming queen and Manson follower Leslie Van Houten held Rosemary down as Tex Watson stabbed her husband. Then Van Houten and Patricia Krenwinkel stabbed Rosemary over fourteen times.”

Awed silence.

The tourists are still quiet when the van arrives on South Bundy Drive.

“Nicole Brown Simpson. Ron Goldman,” the driver announces. “The notorious 875 South Bundy Drive––or it used to be. New owners have changed the infamous street number to 879.”

The driver gives the passengers time to absorb this information, then, “Did you know that Nicole’s feet had no blood on them? And that this told detectives that she was the first to die?

Oh my God, a passenger says.

Then another. Oh my God.

They’re ready.

Ready for what the driver calls “dessert.”

Although it violates chronological order and geographical sense, it is the culmination of all that had come before. It is the complete package: A deranged, sadistic, senseless, tragic, gruesome fatal violation of a young and beautiful woman.

The driver steers the van up Benedict Canyon, then onto Cielo Drive, moving toward a steep, unmarked gated private road.

“10050 Cielo Drive,” the driver announces. “Cary Grant, Henry Fonda, Terry Melcher, Candice Bergen and Roman Polanski and his wife Sharon Tate once lived beyond this very gate.”

Very?

“A day prior to the LaBianca murders, the Mansons took five lives here: Twenty-six year old actress, Sharon Tate, her unborn child; heiress Abigail Folger, hairstylist Jay Sebring, writer Wojciech Frykowski; and Steven Parent, the unlucky friend of the gardener.”

Sighs.

“Although Manson ordered the murders, Tex Watson, Susan Atkins and Patricia Krenwinkel committed the grisly and horrifying homicides which involved slashing, stabbing, cutting and shooting. Hardened police investigators were shocked by the bloodbath.”

Murmurs.

“The night of the killings, Watson climbed the telephone pole and cut the line. There would be no way the victims could call for help.” Pause. “The first to die was Parent, shot and stabbed by Watson as he approached the house.”

“Inside the cursed residence, Folger was stabbed 28 times, Frykowski 51.”

Gasps.

“Tate pleaded for her life to no avail. And after the brutal killings, as Manson directed, the killers wrote ‘Pig’ in blood on the door.”

The passengers slouch in stupefied silence, meditating on fate’s cruelty and the fragility of life.

The black van somberly descends the brittle hills, coming to rest like a battered ship at Hollywood and Vine where a crush of unemployed actors impersonating celebrities and comic book figures jockey for poses with tourists.

“Thanks to all of you fabulous people for choosing Kick The Bucket Tour!” the driver smiles and bats her fake eyelashes. “Tell your friends! I’d be grateful for a five-star rating when you visit our website, and remind you that tips are appreciated!”

The driver gets out, revealing six-inch heels and the flared pants of her sparkly, slinky purple Diana Ross costume. She slides the van’s door open, cautioning passengers to watch their step as they exit onto the sticky pavement.

A few thank the driver.

A couple stuff dollar bills or pocket change in the tip jar.

As the fat librarian struggles to step down, a muscular Spider-Man charges forward. “Selfie with Spider-Man? Only five bucks.”

“Not now.” The driver raises her hand as if to swat him away.

The librarian achieves the curb just as Spider-Man removes something from his fanny pack and hurls himself forward.

Then he thrusts a long knife into the driver’s chest.

Spider-Man efficiently and repeated stabs the driver until blood marinates the front of her costume and drenches the sleeves.

The librarian and a few remaining passengers watch.

“Please,” the driver begs as the figure shoves the weapon into her left breast, then bows and melts into the crowd flowing toward Ripley’s Believe It Or Not Museum.

A passenger inserts two fingers in his mouth and whistles his approval.

“Wow. Just wow,” the librarian says and begins to clap.

The applause is tepid at first, then swells as the driver collapses––her world going black and cold and silent.

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The driver, a handsome young aspiring actor dressed as Charlie Chaplin, delivers his van load of tourists to the final stop, a sticky patch of Hollywood Boulevard not far from Grauman’s Chinese Theater and across the street from the Ripley’s Believe It Or Not Museum.

“And this, folks is the end of the line.” Dramatic pause. “As it was so tragically for one of our very own Kick The Bucket Tour guides just a year ago, savagely knifed to death on this very spot by a deranged man.

Gasps.

Good, he thinks.

That works every time.

The End