

# Hollywood National Park

by Mike Robinson

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Lily Guthrie turned off the television.

The house was eerily quiet as it settled for the night, all noise and distraction now simmering and flattening like a pop drink losing its carbonation. Lily preferred it that way, and in addition to the nationally-regulated Media time, she and Greg had drawn up their own, positively stricter timeframe for the household to watch television, or log onto the internet. The decision was actually a compromise; if Greg Guthrie had had his full way, no television or computer would be sheltered by the same roof that sheltered him or his family. He hated Media, a feeling that often drew heated lines between him and his daughters Ashley and Carly.

Lily, however, was less of a stranger to her younger years, despite their burial twenty years below the surface of her memory. She knew the girls were inquisitive, had crushes, and, as she had before the Media regulation, followed to somewhat discreet order the indulgences and escapades of well-knowns, the denizens of California that roamed free and wild in their own Hollywood National Park.

Lily checked the time. Nine-thirty. Greg was working late tonight, again, waiting for much of the day until co-workers cleared out to get the bulk of the work done. He didn't particularly like people – everyone had some ulterior motive stashed up his or her sleeve, at least everyone as of late. The last of his war buddies, the only social circle Greg had ever really been a part of (in fact that's how Lily had met him, through her brother), was now down in Florida.

Greg claimed Lily and the girls were the only friends he needed, or wanted. Ironically, it was this notion that, Lily suspected, drove Ashley and Carly away from him. They were fraternal twins, going on thirteen, and at that age parents were wished to disappear, meant to come back as respectable human beings in about nine years or so – Lily worried Greg was destroying all chance of that.

Around twenty to ten she headed upstairs to bed. Down the hall she heard giggling, muffled giggling that tried to be soft but leaked through the girls' palms and out the door. Lily snickered, shook her head, and was about to continue on to her room when a parental instinct told her to turn around and follow up on the impish sound.

Lily stopped at the door to listen once more before barging in. Both girls were definitely out of bed, she could tell by the proximity and the noises they were making, that flighty chuckle loaded with the kind of guilty pleasure one might sustain while sneaking sex in the janitor's closet.

She thought about knocking but decided against it. She opened the door, coughing up hallway light into their room and freezing Ashley and Carly like a pair of raccoons caught amongst alleyway garbage cans. Carly held a flashlight over a small stack of papers they had been leafing through. They stared at Mom, wide-eyed.

“What's going on in here?” Lily demanded, gesturing towards the bunk bed. “You're supposed to be asleep! Both of you!”

“Mom, we, um, we...” Ashley tried but her engine wouldn’t start. Neither would Carly’s. They both sat transfixed, flashlight still beaming, as Lily turned on the room light to help her middle-aged eyes decipher what her daughters were looking at.

The papers appeared to be internet print-outs of a catalogue featuring merchandise for one Bobby Toomey, young actor-turned-singer-turned-actor that seemed to have soldered his image to the hearts of many girls Ashley and Carly’s age. Lily thought he looked like a giant Ken doll, if Ken had jet black hair and a stringy, wispy goatee that encompassed his mouth like sparse attendance at a sports stadium. Many of the items being sold were albums, V-DVDs, shirts, posters, mugs and such, all dressed in his likeness, from full-on photos to more intriguing silhouettes and designs.

“What are you two doing with this?” Lily said. “You know Dad wouldn’t like this. Frankly neither do I. And how did you print something out without our permission?”

“Mom, we’re just curious is all,” Ashley, always the more fiery one, contested. “It’s like, no big deal. Seriously. Everyone likes Bobby Toomey, the actor-turned-singer.”

“The singer-turned-actor!” Carly added.

“You haven’t bought any of this stuff, have you?” Lily asked warily.

She saw her daughter’s eyes hunt through a gnarled forest of answers, going from ‘what does she want to hear?’ to ‘what she doesn’t know won’t hurt her.’ The confliction was obvious, and the weak ‘no’ that fell from Ashley’s lips was met with a sharp eye from Lily.

“Be honest, please,” she said. “Where is it?”

Carly threw terrified glances at her sister, who finally buckled and reached beneath her pillow. She brought out a skimpy little t-shirt with Bobby’s smiling face imprinted in black-and-white on the breast.

Lily’s arm became an instinctive fire and burned the shirt clean from Ashley’s grasp. Her daughter scarcely had time to react.

“Aw come on Mom! Tanya’s mom let her have Bobby Toomey’s first three albums, and she can play them whenever she wants! And she has like five posters!”

“I don’t care. Tanya’s not my daughter.” She bunched the shirt up in her hand, making Ashley cringe. “And I’m sure she’s not walking around in clothes like *this*. Now you two know the rules. Good night.”

Lily left her daughters’ bedroom, ignoring the ‘bitch’ that rasped from one of their mouths. She wasn’t sure what to do with the shirt – perhaps she could recycle it and turn it into a scarf or part of a quilt. She hadn’t sewn in a long while, and now she had extra incentive, because quite simply that image of the actor-turned-singer, singer-turned-actor would have to be rid of, if only for the fact that Greg might see it.

Bobby Toomey had to be careful, she thought; because in this day and age, where the young and beautiful and famous were sanctioned off to roam free in their own world, abundant influence over Media and beyond Hollywood’s perimeters was watched with the rapier strictness of a mother gazelle eyeing the encroaching lion. Since the Media restriction not much had happened – there was, of course, trouble initially adjusting to the restriction, but the government had opened a program to take care of it swiftly. Since then, there had been no need for a reintroduction of that program.

Yes, Lily thought on the way to bed. Bobby Toomey had better be careful, or Hollywood National Park could have another hunting season on its dirty little hands.

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Greg Guthrie came home about eleven that night and, thinking Lily to be long asleep, crept with extra caution into the room. Lily, fully conscious the entire time, waited until she felt his weight on the bed before saying anything.

“Remember we’re picking up my parents at the airport tomorrow,” she said with the same coldness she’d confronted Ashley and Carly with. “And they’re staying for dinner.”

“Right,” Greg sighed. “Did they enjoy their stay in La-La Land?”

“Haven’t spoken to them for a few days, but they didn’t stay in Hollywood. That was just a kind of last hurrah for their trip. Just a one-day safari.”

“Very nice. I’m sure we’ll hear all about it tomorrow night.” Greg rolled to the side so his back faced his wife. “Girls asleep alright?”

“Yeah. Didn’t you check on them?”

“No. Didn’t want to wake them.”

Silence took over, holding all sound hostage for release at dawn. Greg fell asleep long before Lily, but she eventually followed suit.

Her parents' plane didn't actually taxi into the gate until seven-fifteen, an hour and a half later than expected, and Lily had to work accordingly to get dinner ready. With her busy in the kitchen, it was Greg and the girls that were sent to pick them up, a situation he was glad but wary about at the same time. It was a chance to keep Ashley and Carly at least on the fence, to catch them by the cuff of their pants should they be teetering in the undesired direction, and also a chance to stop them from becoming total and willing strangers to him and Lily.

Not five minutes after leaving home, Greg spoke.

"So how's school been for you girls?"

"How it's always been," Ashley responded. "No different than before."

"It's alright," Carly said.

"I hope so. Listen, I know I haven't really been around much. Work has been pretty busy and all, you know."

"We know, Dad, we know."

"I know you know, but I just wanna –"

"Dad, it's fine, we get it. You say the same thing every two weeks or so. We're kinda used to it."

"I don't do that, come on."

"Yeah, Dad, you do," Carly piped in quietly. "I mean, usually."

Ashley leaned forward and switched on the radio, and for Greg the inside of the car became a heated and painful migraine. The music diced his brain into awkward chunks as uneven and skewed as the arrhythmic dance-pop crap now screaming through his speakers.

"Change that, please," he commanded.

He caught Ashley rolling her eyes, but she did as instructed. Unfortunately, the next choice of music was even worse – a Bobby Toomey song, to which both girls yelped with pride as they clapped their hands and smiled big drunken smiles. Greg felt sick.

"I'm sorry, no." He switched off the radio in an adamant gesture. "No. Just no."

"Da-ad!"

"No!"

There was no more conversation – only a sulking quiet – as the Guthrie van became another drop into the choppy sea of airport traffic. Carly was the only one who opened her mouth as she pointed out Lily's parents, Bert and Gilda Arthridge, who stood by the curb in brightly-colored country club shirts, holding their luggage and waving with the residual excitement of their vacation.

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"Los Angeles was quite an experience, I'll tell you what," Bert said, firing up the digital camera. Fresh from dinner, everyone was now huddled around the couch, except for Greg, who remained aloof and disinterested at the dining room table.

Lily noticed something in her mother's purse, a red and white medicinal bottle jutting above the open zipper line. Her mother took almost everything under the sun, but this one was unfamiliar to her. She pointed to it.

"What's that, mom? Are those your new blood pressure pills?" she asked.

“These? Oh, no darling, these were just for the trip. They were recommended by Dr. Stevenson.” She picked up the bottle and handed it to her daughter. Lily took them gently and peered at the label. The girls and her father, poised for picture-viewing, were annoyed at the distraction.

“For excessive Morunotiatisis,” she read, pronouncing the word carefully. “Take two a day. What is this for?”

“Celebrity cravings, mostly,” her mother answered plainly. “You take them to prevent Media obsession. My brain’s got better things to worry about than some star couple’s two-week marriage, so these pills prevent me from caring.”

Lily noticed Greg perk up at the table, clearly liking the idea. He kept silent, however, and slid the last of his wine down his throat. Lily quickly counted the empty wine bottles – two, and neither she or her mother drank.

“Are we gonna see these pictures or not?” her father said, playfully testy.

“Yeah, show us, Grampa!” Ashley shouted.

“Alright, looks like someone’s got some sense ‘round her.”

The picture-viewing took only ten or fifteen minutes. Her parents hadn’t even filled up one data card, but nevertheless there were some interesting images to compliment the stories they relayed in tandem. Many of the photographs had been taken in Idaho and Oregon, some by the Snake River, while others were just beautiful shots of mountains and forests and animals. It was very much a nature trip, yet the pictures that Bert seemed most anxious to share, and the pictures the girls seemed most anxious to view, came near the end, their last day of vacation, the top-off in Hollywood National Park.

The first image looked to be a father and son playing catch. Lily thought the tidy domestic scene too out of place for Hollywood, and dreaded some moral-pinching twist.

“This fella here is playing catch with actor Aaron Thomas’s son,” Bert explained. “He’s a Rent-a-Dad, for when Aaron’s busy filming a movie or working a lot. They told us not to take too many pictures since the sub-Dad is paid to be quite aggressively protective.”

He clicked to another.

“This one here is of a couple talent agents around a fresh kill. The bull male apparently represents screen legend Mandy Cruz.”

He clicked to another.

“We got some shots of all the herds of waiters and busboys and struggling actors. There were so many of ‘em we almost forgot to get pictures! But they say they’re important to keep the ecosystem in balance.”

He clicked to another.

“Here we have a director, Felix Heinburg, on the set of his new feature. This guy was our most exciting sighting, since apparently things were going wrong on the movie and he was quite angry. He sent a few actors to their trailers, and actually charged us when we got too close!”

“I almost had a heart attack,” Gilda interjected.

“Yeah, we got outta there in time. Our guide knew how to handle him.” He clicked to another picture. “This is the range where they keep all the failed American Idol contestants, y’know, before they herd them off to their fate. We were told the meat is exclusive to the show’s judges and producers, though, so no one could try any of it.”

He clicked to another.

“Here’s a shot of a pimp, alone, without his usual female network. Normally pimps are nocturnal creatures but apparently this one was active in the day. Couldn’t get a very good shot of him, though – our guide made sure not to get too close.”

He clicked to another.

“This is the talk show host Leslie Melas, grazing in a park near our hotel with a bunch of her fans. There were so many of them it was hard for us to get a good shot of her, too.”

“Did you see Bobby Toomey?” Ashley yipped. “This actor-turned-singer?”

“The singer-turned-actor!” Carly added.

Wide knowing smiles lit the faces of Lily’s parents, having expected the request.

“We saw quite a bit of him, actually,” Bert said in a triumphant tone that, Lily could only imagine, grated her husband to the bone. “That young man certainly gets around. We almost thought he had twins, or doubles! But he’s so busy nowadays attending all the Hollywood events and doing his thing that his face is everywhere.”

“Do you have any pictures of him?” both girls said, virtually in synch. Their eyes bulged with a dreamy and magnificent anticipation. For Greg, the camel’s back had now broken.

“What is with you and that Bobby Toomey?” Greg shot. The dam that normally kept his thoughts at bay had now crumbled against the tidal weight of two bottles of wine. Lily’s stomach began to flutter.

“He’s an awesome singer,” Ashley shot back. “And he loves his fans.”

“It’s all an act, Ash. Isn’t he an actor, too?”

“Mm-hmm, he’s amazing.”

“Oh cut it out you two.” Greg stumbled his way up from the table and made his uncoordinated way towards the couch. He looked at Lily’s parents, and with a stern outstretched finger, said, “Shut off that camera, now.”

“Greg what the hell –”

“Now.”

“What is your fucking problem, Dad?” Ashley shouted. “So we like Bobby Toomey. We like his music. We like his movies. Yes, we want to have sex with Bobby Toomey! Is that what you wanna hear? Huh? For us to just admit that already?”

Carly stepped one slow step backward and seated herself on the arm of the couch.

“No, young lady, that’s not what I want to hear, and I especially don’t want to hear that kind of language come out of your mouth.” Greg’s face became a likeness of a stone gargoyle. “What I want to hear is an admittance of all the time you’ve wasted worshipping some flash-in-the-pan celebrity with absolutely zero morals!”

Ashley turned and fired her way towards the stairs. “C’mon Carly,” she said, and as Carly was about to follow, Greg held her in line with his finger. The rest of the family kept quiet, wishing to disappear or perhaps for a meteor to strike the earth and vaporize this nonsense.

“Don’t you two dare turn your back on me,” Greg said.

The girls exchanged quick glances and continued on. Lily watched her husband’s eyes grow wide with disbelief, and, knowing his next move, held out her hand to stop him.

“Just leave them be, Greg. Please.”

Greg, red and flabbergasted, said, “You’re going to let them get away with such disrespect?” and tore after his daughters. Lily turned to her parents, who had the confused and hurt expressions of someone realizing they’d just been had. She made several gestures and her mouth opened and closed but no explanation surfaced. Instead she threw up her arms and told them to sit tight as she charged after her husband.

To her surprise, the girls hadn't closed the door. They'd chosen to defiantly pin up a Bobby Toomey poster above their bunk bed. The poster was long and horizontal, more like a banner, and it depicted the young celebrity stretched across the yellow-purple sands of a tropical beach at sunset. He was half-naked, wearing only cut-off denim shorts, and his flesh was darkly bronzed and glistening with what was presumably a greasy lotion.

"Ashley, Carly," Lily said, pinching her sinuses. "Please take those down. You're concerning us. Both of you."

"Why? Why is this con-?"

"Young lady just take it down right now!" Greg yelled.

From downstairs Lily's father spoke up, projecting his voice as far as his eighty-four year old lungs would allow.

"Leave them alone! They're just girls!"

"You keep out of this!"

"Please don't talk to my father like that, Greg."

"Fine," Greg said, and reached in, grabbed the door and shut it, swiping clean any view of the girls or their Bobby Toomey poster. He marched downstairs, the wine still playing with his coordination, and went straight for the phone. Bert and Gilda were up and ready to confront him.

"Who are you calling?" Bert demanded.

Greg held up a finger, face still swarming with frustration, and, in a furtive and blunt voice, as fleeting as a bullet ricocheting off a surface, he said, "I'm calling the authorities."

The Bobby Toomey phenomenon continued to grow, and with it grew the uneasiness of millions of parents and families across the nation. News stations were limited to a minute's worth of Hollywood talk every half hour, but almost all of it nowadays had to do either with Bobby's upcoming album, that day's girlfriend, or the tiff he had with a waiter in a restaurant on Sunset Blvd. Many weren't sure if it was his radiant charisma or the fact that he seemed to run all of the entertainment bases, but as his name became synonymous with Hollywood, many federal buildings around the country were inundated with calls from concerned folks, asking if anything was to be done about the Bobby Toomey shrines many of their children had erected in their rooms.

Some authorities suggested a reverse psychology approach, claiming an over-abundance of the star might sweat out the intrigue and popularity of his name, sickening fans to the point of indifference. They said the Media restriction was like feeding people a juicy steak one bite every week, thus it kept the hunger fresh. If Bobby Toomey's image were to smother screens and pages, fans would undoubtedly tire of him.

As it turned out, this course of action was listened to but not considered, as many of the calls received asked but only one anxious question. One of the daily callers was a man named Greg Guthrie, and with his own self-seclusion and contempt for Media he was ignorant of the mass number of others calling with the same request – so when news finally came of the hunting program being reinstated, he chalked it up to his own dogged persistence and smiled his first genuine smile in nearly two years.

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“You're going to California?”

He'd come home around ten-thirty, a little earlier than normal, and Lily was still up reading. She wasn't sure what to make of his goofy energy Greg now carried with him.

“I'm going to California!” he repeated triumphantly. “Our worries, our problems – they're over, Lily. Gone.”

“Why? Because they opened hunting season in Hollywood?”

“Oh good, you heard about it, too. I'm heading out there; dunno how successful I'll be in getting the real Bobby Toomey, but apparently they've widened the crosshairs to include other, lesser-known actor-turned-singers.”

“Or singer-turned-actors,” Lily said with a sardonic smirk.

“Right.”

“You realize that Ashley and Carly won't speak to you,” she said. “At all.”

“They'll come around,” Greg stated confidently. “And they'll thank me when they realize the infection I'm curing them of.”

“So how does this thing work? How many hunters are there?”

“Lots. We're sent in to find whatever celebrity's in season, or type of celebrity.”

“And kill them, right?” Lily prodded.

“No, actually, it's not like animal hunting,” he said, hoping the ensuing argument would get her full support. “They don't use bullets and we don't kill the celebrity. They say it's best to leave death to nature, the ‘raw law’ of Hollywood. Instead what happens is the hunter shoots

whatever celebrity or type of celebrity is in season with some special brand of tranquilizer that just renders the target unconscious, useless, for a while.”

“Until the public forgets about him,” Lily said. “Or her.”

“Pretty much,” Greg said. A fine mist of disappointment lingered about him. “That’s also why the dosage is determined by the government. If they feel more than a year’s absence of this celebrity is needed, they’ll of course up the dosage. I asked if they thought Bobby Toomey might need more but they just snickered, saying he’d be forgotten about within six months. Personally I’m not as optimistic. Our daughters have been fans of his for months now. And they have some of his paraphernalia.”

“They haven’t bought any of his stuff,” Lily said, consciously leaving out the skimpy shirt Ashley had presented before her. Greg never needed to know about that. “I’ve made sure of it. Their friend Tanya’s dad works in some company affiliated with a recording studio, so sometimes they get extra free merchandise, and occasionally Tanya gives them something.”

“Doesn’t matter. His face is still splattered all over their room. And you can’t be sure that Ashley and Carly aren’t paying for some of this crap themselves.”

The next minute fell with silent screams off the conversational train. They were listening for noise from the girls’ room but heard none. It was Lily who spoke next.

“So...” she began, still trying to mend the broken bridge to her husband. “There’s no guarantee that you’ll be the one to find this Bobby Toomey, right? If there are a bunch of other hunters out there, too?”

“No, but I will,” Greg said, lips molded in a loony grin. “It’ll be me, just watch. I’ll do it.”

Greg's plane was to leave in the early morning, just prior to sunrise. As such, no one was awakened to his departure. He milled about in the kitchen for awhile, fixing coffee even though he'd given up caffeine four years ago. The anxiety strung his nerves like guitar cords, and although his increasing heart rate and odd feeling of disconnection told him not to swig any more coffee, he couldn't stop. He wanted – no, he needed – a solid wake-up call, something to fuel him through the five-hour plane flight and edge him one or two steps ahead of those other hunters.

He hadn't hunted since he was ten, and that had been with his grandfather. Greg tried to dust off the memory but much of it had withered away, lending highlight to the only image that really did stick: that of the doe's eyes, those blackly water drops of fear as the gun crashed and spit its brass saliva into its hind leg. Then the other crash and its neck burst, and as it staggered on limp legs and limp hope, fumbling, crying, his grandfather had patted him on the back.

"Not too bad, boy," he had said. "Not too bad."

Although he had been young at the time he had never felt such power. The heavy metal machine in his quivering white hands meant dominance – of what, he couldn't be sure. Not then, not even now. But it was that rush of superiority that Greg never forgot on that excursion, that notion that anything could bear its heaviest and deadliest arsenal and still present no match.

Greg was soon given a bum's rush from his memories by the taxi horn, honking impatiently as it awaited him outside. He gave his bags and all the equipment another once-over, ensuring everything was there and in place. Then he checked his watch, made sure his letter to his daughters was on the kitchen table, and was on his way out when he remembered he hadn't given Lily a kiss goodbye.

Ambivalence kneaded him, but Greg decided against going back upstairs. In a few days time, there would be plenty of time for celebration and kisses.

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The Guthrie household phone rang twice before Lily picked it up. On the other end she could hear a lot of noise, crowd-noise, people yelling and screaming and shouting. The cacophony was so off-putting that she made a motion to hang it up. But a voice, a very familiar one, in fact the one she had married, came through as the loudest amongst the chaos.

"Greg?" Lily said, raising her own voice. "Is that you?"

"Lily! Lily? You there?"

"Yes, I'm here, Greg. I haven't heard from you in two days. What's going on? When are you coming home?"

"I did it, sweetheart," he shouted.

Lily knew it was either something miraculous or life-threatening, as he hadn't called her 'sweetheart' since their wedding day.

"You did? What happened?"

"I did it," he said again.

There was more crowd noise, swallowing Greg's voice. And then there was silence, followed by the idle hum of the dial tone.

Struck by an ominous intuition, Lily considered turning on the television. She knew she was risking an overtime fee on her Media bill, as between her and the girls the Guthrie house had used up close to, if not all, the allotted television hours. But the shadow cast by this intuition was an apathy that said none of that mattered anymore.

As she feared, Greg's face was on the news, surrounded by a pack of cameras and reporters that asked him questions and made statements, tempting and taunting him for a sound bite or perhaps a mild recreation of the action that brought them to him: the death of Bobby Toomey, actor-turned-singer, singer-turned-actor, Greg's hundred and fifteen pound prize bagged at fifty paces on Hollywood and Highland.

'I did it,' Greg had said, so simply, so *completely*, as if he'd just fulfilled a life's goal.

Lily wasn't sure she could watch much more. Her husband had disregarded the required tranquilizer and killed a celebrity, a forgivable offense in the eyes of many but still an offense, still something that meant lawyers and trials and possibly prison visits. And he hadn't just snapped – that sloppy, almost loony grin had told Lily, clearly in retrospect, that the plan to disobey the federal hunting regulations had already been in effect in his mind, quite possibly well before they had even opened the season again, ever since the first spying of Bobby Toomey's handsomely plastic face on the poster above the girls' bunk bed.

Lily wanted to stop watching but found herself transfixed. She was dreading that Greg's short life in Media would soon have to be shared by her, as well as Ashley and Carly. Someone does what everyone else is thinking and the public lives in vicarious hunger through them, eating up the tabloids and news shows to satiate the craving for full knowledge of his or her life. Greg Guthrie had done exactly that, and now Celebrity was here to claim him, to spit the bitter irony in his face. He had killed a shark and attracted an even larger one with its blood. Celebrity awaited Lily and her daughters now, too, its odor so strong, smelt states away, its claws tapping patiently and resonating the same distance. The wilds of Hollywood called.

Lily Guthrie turned off the television.