

Raul Guerrero

The Whaling Bar: La Jolla

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Mr. Chandler and The Whaling Bar

For years before moving to La Jolla, Raymond and Cissy Chandler had led peripatetic lives, moving sometimes two or three times a year in and around Los Angeles, always renting furnished apartments. In their thirty years of marriage, they moved nearly two dozen times. I think it's one of the reasons Chandler wrote so well about Los Angeles—because he knew it intimately from so many different perspectives.

One might well ask, why did they move so often? The answer, in part, is Chandler was a restless man, constantly seeking new places to stimulate his imagination. The Chandlers were also very fussy people, constantly finding fault with wherever they lived. In truth,

their sense of rootedness came from each other, from the self-enclosed world they created together, and the many houses or apartments they occupied meant nothing to them, or next to nothing, compared to their sense of belonging to each other

The Chandlers moved to La Jolla in 1946, when he was fifty-nine years old and his wife Cissy was seventy-seven. Cissy had always wanted to live in La Jolla. The Chandlers had begun vacationing in the charming coastal town in the late 1930s, sometimes staying a month or more, until finally, with the money Chandler made from writing screenplays, they could afford to buy a house at 6005 Camino de la Costa, for the then princely sum of \$40,000. It was a modest

place by today's standards, but it had a lovely bay window with views of the sea, and nice rooms that looked onto a central courtyard.

The house on Camino de la Costa was the first house they ever bought, and also the last. Cissy died of a chronic lung condition in 1954, just eight years after they had settled down in the seaside town, and within a few months Chandler sold the house and once again began leading a nomadic life.

He had been exceedingly devoted to his wife, in spite of the fact that she had deceived him at the time of their marriage in 1924 and listed her age on the marriage certificate as forty-three, instead of her true age

of fifty-three. (Chandler was thirty-five at the time.) Only later did he figure out he'd married a woman much older than he thought. It doesn't seem to have mattered much in the end he often described his marriage as "almost perfect." It's ironic that the writer who created one of the most iconic bachelors in the history of American literature, the private eye and loner Philip Marlowe, was himself devoted to the domicile and worshipped his older wife. Over the years, Chandler and Cissy led an almost hermetically sealed existence, with few friends or family to disrupt their private existence. Cissy, who was reputed to be high-spirited and witty as well as a great beauty ("She is irresistible," Chandler once wrote, "without even

knowing it or caring much about it"), helped keep her husband sober, cooked him excellent meals, and in general cared for him in every way. Her high spirits helped lift the writer's own darker moods, and the witty exchanges his private eye Philip Marlowe became famous for were to some degree played out in his own marriage to the woman he adored and whom he nursed lovingly through the abominable anarchy of old age.

Chandler lived only five years after Cissy's death—five very troubled and in many ways unhappy years. Part of that time he spent in London, the scene of much of his youth, where he had been raised by his divorced Irish-Anglo mother and attended Dulwich College. (His American father had abandoned the family

when Chandler was only seven and living in Nebraska.) But a good portion of his final years were spent in La Jolla, in various rented houses and hotels. After Cissy's death, he lived on and off at the Hotel Del Charro. He also rented a house at 1265 Park Row, and later settled into a cottage at 6925 Neptune Place, where he wrote much of his last novel, *Playback*, which takes place in a fictional version of La Jolla called Esmeralda and has many scenes set in a hotel modeled on La Valencia. That novel was published in 1957, just two years before Chandler's death.

His last residence was 834 Prospect Street, a cottage he rented from a woman named Mrs. Murray, whom he seems

to have been very fond of. The cottage is no longer there. Like so many places, it's fallen victim to redevelopment. From his residence on Prospect Street Chandler was able to walk to the village center, and often did so. The Whaling Bar was only a short distance away, though it must have seemed a long journey to an ailing and lonely writer. While researching my book on Chandler, *The Long Embrace: Raymond Chandler and the Woman He Loved*, I spent a number of evenings in The Whaling Bar. It always seemed a magical place, replete with ghosts but fully alive with the present. It was the sort of place Chandler liked, one with a sense of the past, frequented by people with taste and class. He once said:

"I like people with manners, grace, some social intuition, and education slightly above the *Reader's Digest* fan, people whose pride of living does not express itself in their kitchen gadgets and automobiles. I don't like people who can't sit still for a half an hour without a drink in their hands, and apart from that I should prefer an amiable drunk to Henry Ford. I like a conservative atmosphere, a sense of the past; I like everything Americans of past generations used to go and look for in Europe, but at the same time I don't want to be bound by the rules."

In The Whaling Bar, one could find such an atmosphere, and Chandler appreciated that. The civilized feeling exuded by the old hotel, the beauty of the intimate

bar, with its authentic harpoons and pewter candleholders, the antique wooden shutters, the miniature paintings and display of carved ivory scrimshaw, and red leather booths provided a sense of coziness as well as a pleasing aesthetic. Even the mural on the wall above the bar, depicting a New Bedford whaling scene, originally painted by Wing Howard, must have amused him—that little piece of East Coast Old World transplanted to the new. I wonder if he was around when the blood got painted out of the water—when the wounded whales, pierced by harpoons, magically became bloodless in their suffering, and the roiled blue waters became unsullied by the dying beasts—just to satisfy the bar patrons

who didn't like to mix tragedy with a felicitous hour

Bars were something Chandler knew a thing or two about, having spent a good deal of time in a good many of them. They held a special beauty and magic for him, especially at that bewitching hour when they first opened for business:

"I like bars just after they open for the evening. When the air inside is still cool and clean and everything is shiny and the barkeep is giving himself that last look in the mirror to see if his tie is straight and his hair is smooth. I like the neat bottles on the bar back and the lovely shining glasses and the anticipation. I like to watch the man mix the first one of the evening and put

it down on a crisp mat and put the little folded napkin beside it. I like to taste it slowly. The first quiet drink of the evening in a quiet bar—that's wonderful."

Raul Guerrero has captured the feeling of this kind of bar, The Whaling Bar, in paintings that suggest both the present and the past, a rarefied atmosphere where time stops, people line up for a gimlet, or martini, or scotch rocks, and the world outside goes on, and on, unobserved. But here time is arrested for a while. I've always admired Raul's paintings, but I have a special affection for this body of work and its depiction of an iconic La Jolla landmark. Because it reminds me of Chandler, arguably the most iconic of La Jolla's many famous residents and also one

of my literary heroes, a great American novelist who once said of himself that only he and Marilyn Monroe had managed to reach all the brows—high brow, low brow, and middle brow. That was his magic and legacy, this ability to transform the lowly mystery novel into literature and to reach across generations and races and different classes to capture his audience. And here, in this very particular landscape of the no-time, all-time, no-place and every-place Whaling Bar, Raul Guerrero and Mr Chandler finally meet. I think they might have liked each other

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