

37 - King of the Castle

“Some mote him Mike....Some apt him Arth...He was one time our King of the Castle”

—James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, p. 44-45



The newly completed Casa de Lila as viewed from another street, looking toward the Pacific Ocean, 1994



Casa de Lila and Castillo del Lago

Casa de Lila was a castle, or at least it looked the part. It had towering ramparts and crowned a promontory. It had a swimming pool, which was a moat of sorts. And if you concede it was a castle, then for a short time I was the king of it, but mostly in the sense that a man's home is his castle. When Madonna, the Queen of Pop and the most famous woman in the world at the time, bought *Castillo del Lago*, the nine-story castle next door in 1993, we

became the king and queen of adjoining estates in the hills of Hollywood. Madonna *literally* looked down on my half of the petty kingdom.¹ But she could not *figuratively* look down on me, because “the girl next door” did not even know I existed. My neighbor played her queenship to the hilt by having her worker bees paint her beehive with red stripes of yellow background to make sure everyone in the L.A. basin knew where she reigned. Curiously, even though Castillo del Lago is contiguous to Casa de Lila, the address is 6342 Mulholland Highway, on the same serpentine street as both



View from the Queen of Pop's boudoir in 1993



The Queen Bee's yellow-striped beehive

Hollywood Cove and Lara Huxley's house.

Casa de Lila was a vexatious, six-year undertaking that began with buying the first of three “unbuildable” lots for \$75,000 in 1989. While my plans for Casa de Lila



Contiguous properties: Castillo del Lago on left, Casa de Lila on right, looking north

¹ Regarding the picture taken from Madonna's bedroom there is nothing salacious to tell. I was let in by the contractor as a neighbor and fellow contractor.

were working their way through the planning and building departments, I did the concept design for Jorge's second house, at 6020 Mulholland, being careful to preserve my view corridor. At the same time, I designed and built a new addition on Dorathi's house. I also drew up building plans for a food mart in East Los Angeles. This was followed by an extensive home remodel and a new addition for "Olivia," an actress living in Woodland Hills with whom I was seriously involved with for over a year.

In June 1990 we threw a completion party for Olivia's job. Regretfully, *Cervezas* were available and it became a big problem for two of the helpers, both named Fernando, both of whom hailed from the same barrio in Mexico City as José. To distinguish themselves apart they called each other Flaco and Gordo ("Slim" and "Fatty.") They were always bickering, a kind of Mexican Laurel and Hardy, but without the humor. Unbeknownst to me, Gordo had been on the wagon since an alcohol-fueled incident in Mexico that led to him fleeing the country a year before.

The two Fernandos appeared to be in good spirits when Olivia and I turned in for the night, so we let them sleep in the living room. We had almost fallen asleep when we heard a loud noise. I ran out to find the two Fernandos scuffling on both sides of the double French doors. Flaco was dancing around like a bullfighter trying to keep at least one of the doors between him and the raging bull. I could see that Gordo had a nine-inch, serrated kitchen knife in one hand and another knife lay on the floor below a dent in the wall where the handle had struck. Flaco finally gave up trying to hold back Gordo and ran behind a picnic table. There was a terrible commotion as Gordo smashed the wooden benches into the table. Flaco took off with the knife-wielding Gordo close behind. I followed them past the ruins of the picnic table, around the new bedroom where my mother was sleeping soundly, past the bedroom where Olivia's boys were sleeping, and past the new master bath, where Olivia was frantically grabbing her bathrobe.

I caught up with Gordo at the front of the house. He claimed he had tossed the knife. Olivia was now next to me examining the vicious teeth marks on Flaco's shoulder. Gordo said Flaco insulted his mother. Flaco said Gordo insulted his mother first. Upon hearing this, Gordo made a subtle movement with his hand. Flaco cried out that Gordo had the knife in his pants. I had barely translated in my head what he said when Gordo pulled out the knife, grabbed Flaco, and began violently stabbing

him in the back. I saw the blade flash three times and twice I slammed my fist as hard as I could into Gordo's side. It was like hitting a slab of beef. I grabbed Gordo's bull-like neck while Olivia tried to pull his arm. At this point I thought it likely that, after killing Flaco, Gordo would also slaughter me and Olivia.

After the assault, Gordo, breathing heavily and exhausted, pulled back and let the knife fall to the ground. We were surprised and relieved to see that the blade of the knife was bent and there was no blood. Somehow, against all odds, Flaco had nimbly bent the blade with his fingers behind his back on the first stroke!

I hustled Gordo into my car while Olivia was throwing up from the shock of it all. I drove Gordo seventeen miles away to a street corner in Hollywood of his choosing, and ordered him to never come back, and to never drink again. Incredibly, Gordo would later ask through what few friends he had left if he could come back and help build Casa de Lila. It was a hard no, and I was very careful about buying beer for anyone after that. The incident added greatly to my disdain for liquor in all forms, especially around the job site. Considering the dangers involved in construction, and the plethora of tools at hand that can be used to kill and maim, even without intention, it was an easy decision. As if to remind me, Greg Tate, my best finish carpenter, had a huge scar above his knee where, on a previous job, his rotary saw had kicked back and bit him.

I hate fire also, and with an eye to fire safety, I made sure Casa de Lila was highly fire resistant. It had fire sprinklers inside and out, and had its own fire hydrant. Durand Drive formed a firebreak as it looped around the property. It had tall retaining walls built of reinforced concrete. It was only 5,300 square feet, including the guest house, but it looked huge because its tall and narrow profile was what the site and the view potential required. Because it commanded a mountain ridge, the top floors had an awe-inspiring 360 degree view of the entire Los Angeles basin, including downtown, Griffith observatory, Lake Hollywood, the Santa Monica Mountains, and even a glimpse of the San Fernando Valley through Cahuenga Pass. It also had a view of Hollywood Cove, a half-mile to the north-north-west, along with Hollywood sign just above it.

The lot had been considered, in practical terms, unbuildable ever since Hollywoodland was first built out in the early 1920s. Access to the narrow ridge on top of the lot required climbing up the side of the cliff with a rope that the previous owner

had tied to a stump. One evening, after pulling myself up and taking in the mesmerizing sea of twinkling lights before me, I judged that the extraordinary effort required to build a house worthy of the site would surely pay off. I had carefully studied the adjacent nine-story Castillo del Lago, which occupied a larger, adjoining property on the intersecting ridge, which had been used by gangster Bugsy Siegel as a gambling den and speakeasy. Curiously, Laura Huxley told me she and Aldous had seriously considered buying the Italianate villa in 1961 after they lost their Deronda house to fire. If they had, Laura might well have been my neighbor instead of Madonna.

On the practical side, I hired soil and geological engineers to analyze the underlying soil and strata. The strata were found to be sloped down towards north, where the cliff was not as high as measured from the street, thus able to be restrained with retaining walls of a practical height, and the soil was decomposed granite. If the strata had sloped to the south, the project would have been over before it started. In addition to the safety and engineering concerns, I wanted to build a house that was beautiful, but also profitable enough to allow me to finally build the main house on Mulholland, where I could pursue other creative activities full time. It was the five-year plan. I was also starting to think I had sown enough wild oats and was ready to settle down in my Mulholland love nest and have a kid or two with the right woman.

In a little over three years, I had gone from having nothing to having a finished house in the Hollywood Hills with \$500,000 in equity (\$1.5 million in 2025 dollars), which I was now willing to risk on a new project that might double or triple my net worth. Brimming with confidence—perhaps hubris—from the previous success, I decided to bet my entire stake on a much more challenging project.

I refinanced the Mulholland house which gave me enough money to buy the new lot, hire a structural engineer, pay the permit fees, and have enough money left over to build the retaining walls and the guest house. The plan was to get a construction loan to finish the project once I could show enough collateral.

It was also necessary to lease the upper floors of the Mulholland house in order to service the new mortgage. A young actor named Keanu Reeves would become my tenant. He signed the lease on my fully furnished Mulholland house in December 1989 and would stay for four years, which is how long I needed to finish Casa de Lila. As a part of our agreement, Keanu agreed to let me continue to occupy the basement

level of the house, as long as I agreed to not complain when he jammed with his folk-thrash band Dogstar, in the garage directly above my head. On those nights, I either slept on the porch under a mosquito net or in the tool shed. I was also at Olivia's house much of 1989-1990. Later, I would move into the Casa de Lila



I occupied the walkout basement off and on between 1989 and 1994

guest house before moving on up to the top floor for a short while after the house was built.

When I first met Keanu to sign the lease, I was slightly aware of who he was from having seen *Parenthood* where his character says about the dead-beat husband of his future-mother: "You need a license to buy a dog, or drive a car. Hell, you need a license to catch a fish! But they'll let any butt-reaming asshole be a father."

I also vaguely remembered him from a movie trailer or poster related to *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*, which had come out recently. When I visited him to check on things and go over the inventory, Keanu and his co-star, Alex Winter who played Bill, were hanging out in my living room looking like a scene in their time-travel movie. Beer cans were stacked in the windows, a motorcycle was inside the house, and an electric guitar was on its stand, ready to be picked up and played at top volume. I was concerned that Keanu was going to act out his screen persona in my house, and he did to some extent, but on the whole Keanu still turned out to be, an unusual, yet most excellent tenant. Most importantly, his accountant paid rent every month like clockwork. During his tenancy, Keanu reprised his role in *Bill and Ted's Bogus Adventure*, was a vampire slayer in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and channeled Siddhartha in *Little Buddha*. He also had lead roles in *My Own Private Idaho*, *Point Break*, *Speed* and various other films. He got to be a huge star. Over the years since, he has earned the reputation of being kind-hearted even though some of his movie characters are ruthless killers (but only when they have to be, or when someone kills his character's

dog). I cannot say that in real life he would not harm a fly, but do I know he would not harm a rattlesnake, even if like me, the snake was next to his futon on the porch while he was in it.

It was August 3, 1991. At first I did not know what that rapid-fire thumping was, at first thinking a pipe under the spigot had burst and was shooting against the wall. I stuck my head through a low, stair-stepped window to investigate and came nose to nose with the rattler. I asked Keanu to put on some boots and come down from upstairs. I instructed him to hold the shovel. I flushed out the rattlesnake and Keanu pinned it with the shovel. I took over the shovel while Keanu pleaded with me not to



Porch bed with mosquito net above and rattlesnake on the side

harm it. But I was too much the Texan to know that next time the rattler might decide to cuddle up with me in bed under the blankets on a cold night.

It was difficult to get the permits for the new project. Some of the neighbors used the same design ordinance I had ardently supported to deny the plan based on their inability, or

unwillingness, to read blueprints. The Neighborhood Design Review turned it down, but my appeal to city council was successful. Admittedly, as measured from the street where the lovely young couple is standing in the photograph, it was about ninety feet tall. But it was stair-stepped up the hill, and the seven floors were divided between two buildings, the guest house and the main house, each with its own elevator. Technically it did not violate the height ordinance because it fit the requirement to not exceed forty-five feet above any given point from the original grade. It was also stark white and thus quite prominent when first completed. Since then, landscaping has taken over so much that it is often assumed to be one of the beloved, original 1920s Hollywoodland villas.



Pink paint, landscaping and tourists have since taken over

The day before I broke ground was Sunday, January 6, 1991, the Christian day of the Epiphany, celebrating the three kings following the star to the baby Jesus. I would see stars of a different kind that day, but Jesus' name did come up. I was climbing up the rope on my way to the ridge, and had nearly reached the edge of the cliff, when I suddenly found myself falling in an avalanche of dust, gravel and dirt. I landed on my feet, enduring the debris raining down, but relieved for a brief instant that I was uninjured, before I got the next surprise. The stump, still tied

to the rope, landed directly on top of my head, along with a substantial clod of dirt held together with the roots. This is when, despite my paganism, the name of Jesus Christ was invoked, along with a common middle name that the nuns back at St. Ann's would have gotten apoplectic over. I saw stars and was knocked senseless for a time before I managed to go sit on the curb across the street. I was in a bit of a daze, but eventually made my way back to Mulholland, where one of my neighbors described the injury as looking like a rotten peach.



Building site the morning we broke ground, Jan. 1991

One of my epiphanies that day was to never again trust a dead tree stump. The next day, I tied off a sturdy, new rope onto a small but strong tree. However, my workers soon thereafter installed a second rope, identical to the first, in order to haul up materials. The second rope was tied to a twig just so they could keep track of it. The climbing rope got rolled up and hidden

under the tree. I saw the second rope and, naturally thinking it was the strong one I had carefully prepared, began to rappel down the cliff. Again the rope came loose, and I took a fast ride down. Only the rope

landed on my head this time and I only had a few scrapes and a muddy knee.

An even more physical insult would follow soon after. The grading crew removed twelve dump trucks full of dirt from where the garage and guest house would be. All of the loose dirt from the bottom of the cliff, the same soil that had twice softened my landing when I fell, went over to Mulholland with the intention of providing topsoil for winter rye. With my heart pounding, I spent a frantic day shoveling and raking to get it



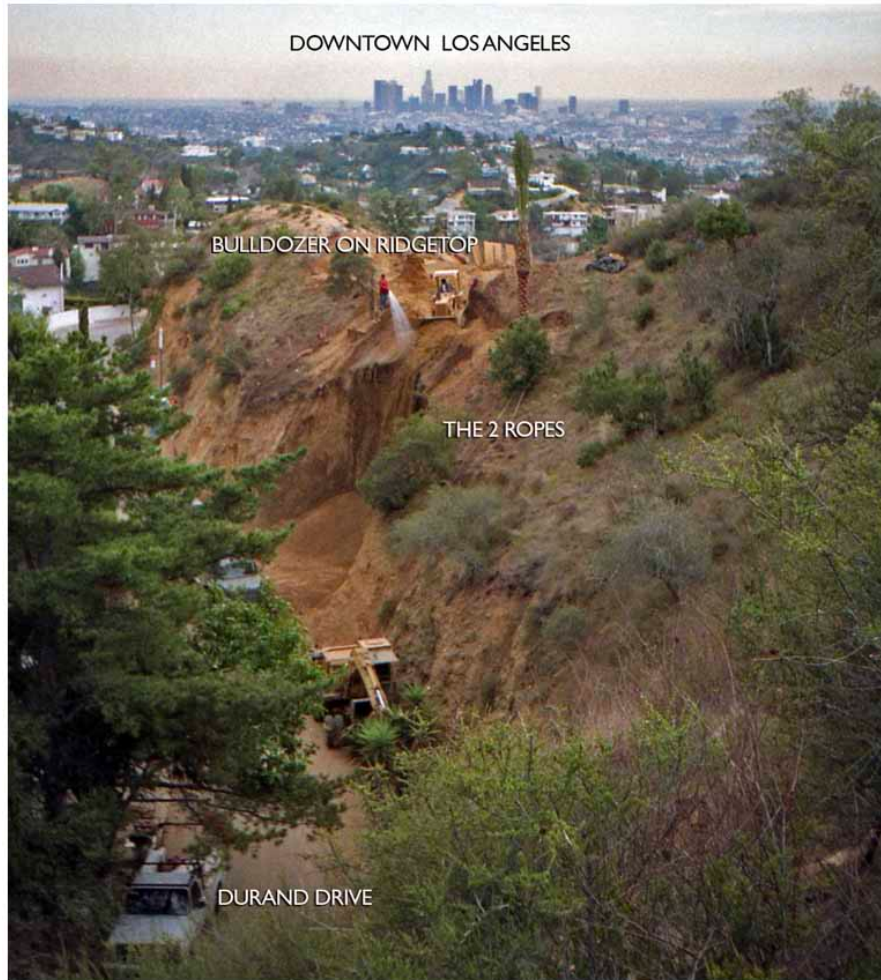
"The Fort" an early construction project, 1964



With most of my construction crew, 1991

seeded and watered by nightfall. I had not formally exercised in several weeks because of all the physical exertion due to construction. But this particular morning I jumped out of bed and resolved to still do my stretching and push-ups.

Because I was in a hurry, I skipped the stretching and immediately dropped down and did sixty push-ups. I began to stand up and collapsed in pain. Fernando, who we no longer needed to call Flaco, was outside my window and I called for him to help me. I experienced a back spasm so bad I could not move from the floor. Apparently, the fall off the cliff and the blow to the head, followed by the excessive shoveling and raking, caused my back to give out. I was temporarily paralyzed. I could not do anything but call an ambulance to take me to the hospital for rounds of x-rays,



The ridgetop excavation begins at 3043 Durand Dr., January 1991

anti-inflammatory drugs, muscle relaxants and bed rest. Laying flat on my back for three days, unable to move—and peeing in a bottle—I had a lot of time to think about my life, and my father and son's deaths. It was then I realized with a start that my father's birthday fell on the very day of the back injury, January 24th. It gave me a newfound appreciation for the vulnerability of our human bodies and what my father went through in his last

years. I wondered, *were the sins of the father being visited upon the son?* Being Catholic, he must have felt guilty about cheating on my mother, and then marrying a woman younger than me. As an ex-Catholic I found it hard to shake off the residual, yet still ingrained, guilt over enjoying sex, not being monogamous, and not committing to one person for my entire life. I also felt bad about leaving Olivia, even though she pushed me to leave, before changing her mind and trying desperately to get me to go back with her. This is the kind of stuff I mulled over for three days before I could walk a few tentative steps. Recovery from the herniated disk was very slow and painful, even while I was having to supervise the rest of the grading. I was still in my thirties, but during the flare-ups I would be bent over, with my pelvis thrust forward, walking and feeling like an old man, thinking often of dear old Dad moving with his cane toward the end of his life.

However, even though bad luck came in the proverbial threes, the third time was the charm, or at least charm adjacent, because those three accidents in three weeks were the only injuries of note I would suffer during the following four years of off and on construction at Casa de Lila. The accident with Martin, Gordo's attempt to murder Flaco, my falls, and the back injury sobered me up to the potential dangers and I took extra precautions. I worried even more about my workers. I could imagine countless ways to die on this project, and considering the mishaps that had already piled up, the odds were that dozens of workers working for years on a hazardous cliff-top location would not all get through unscathed.

Construction like this is not for the faint of heart, but I had to keep going even if my heart was feeling faint at times. With all of the toil on stair-stepped mountain terraces by my Hispanic helpers hoisting palm trees, tools and materials up wooden ladders and makeshift steps cut into the cliff face, it felt like we were building a little Machu Picchu. I hoped no one, including me, would end up being sacrificed to the god of the mountain.



Workers moving a palm tree up a cliff

After the guest house area was partially excavated for a staging area, we had to use a crane to get a bulldozer on top of the ridge and keep it leashed until we had a bench cut into the hill. Commercial dump trucks, whose drivers had to negotiate narrow, winding roads, removed 114 loads of decomposed granite, and eventually brought back three loads of topsoil.

During construction I would often think back to my first construction projects, done with my little brother's help. Whether it was building tunnels in Midland, "The Fort" in Houston, or Hollywood Cove and Casa de Lila, they all engendered the same sort of intense feelings of connection with the soil, the building, and my helpers. Our crew at 3043 Durand Dr. at times felt like family as we all worked together, for the most part, peacefully and cheerfully toward a common goal, taking pleasure in seeing the Casa coming together. Like a family, there were occasional squabbles or misunderstandings, but the black sheep who came and went did not spoil it for the rest of us. Gordo stayed away, so there were no attempted murders, and no one was

seriously injured during construction.

The pulley we used to hoist materials up to the main house also served as homemade spinal decompression. I do not know how much it helped my back but I learned I had to trust the pulley, the rope, and the workers pulling me up before I could relax enough for the



Getting some bi-directional spinal decompression with the pulley, 1991

muscles and the spine to release the tension. The dirt piled up over the concrete offered some assurance, especially when I was upside down or fifteen feet up, that if I fell I might not break my neck or my legs.