



THE  
LEMUR

A NOVEL

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## GLASS HOUSES

**T**he researcher was a very tall, very thin young man with a head too small for his frame and an Adam's apple the size of a golf ball. He wore rimless spectacles the lenses of which were almost invisible, the shine of the glass giving an extra luster to his large, round, slightly bulging black eyes. A spur of blond hair sprouted from his chin, and his brow, high and domed, was pitted with acne scars. His hands were slender and pearly-pale, with long, tapering fingers—a girl's hands, or at least the hands a girl should have. Even though he was sitting down, the crotch of his baggy jeans sagged halfway to his knees. His none too clean T-shirt bore the legend Life Sucks and Then You Die. He looked about seventeen but must be, John Glass guessed, in his late twenties, at least. With that

long neck and little head and those big, shiny eyes, he bore a strong resemblance to one of the more exotic rodents, though for the moment Glass could not think which one.

His name was Dylan Riley. Of course, Glass thought, he would be a Dylan.

“So,” Riley said, “you’re married to Big Bill’s daughter.”

He was lounging in a black-leather swivel chair in Glass’s borrowed office on the north-facing side of Mulholland Tower. Behind him, through a wall of plate glass, gray Manhattan sulked steamily under a drifting pall of April rain.

“Does that seem funny to you?” Glass inquired. He had an instinctive dislike of people who wore T-shirts with smart things written on them.

Dylan Riley snickered. “Not funny, no. Surprising. I wouldn’t have picked you as one of Big Bill’s people.”

Glass decided to let that go. He had begun to breathe heavily through his nostrils, *hiss-hiss*, *hiss-hiss*, always a warning sign.

“*Mister Mulholland*,” Glass said heavily, “is eager that I have all the facts, and that I have them the right way round.”

Riley smiled his goofy smile and swiveled the chair first to one side and then the other, nodding happily. “All the facts,” he said, “sure.” He seemed to be enjoying himself.

“Yes,” Glass said with stony emphasis, “all the facts. That’s why I’m hiring you.”

In one corner of the office there was a big square metal desk, and Glass went now and sat down carefully behind it. He felt less panic-stricken sitting down. The office was on the thirty-ninth floor. It was absurd to be expected to conduct business—to do anything—at such a height. On his first day there he had edged up to the plate-glass wall and peered down to see, a couple of floors below, fluffy white clouds that looked like soft icebergs sailing sedately across a sub-

merged city. Now he put his hands flat on the desk before him as if it were a raft he was trying to hold steady. He very much needed a cigarette.

Dylan Riley had turned the chair around to face the desk. Glass was sure the young man could sense how dizzy and sick he felt, perched up here in this crystal-and-steel eyrie.

“Anyway,” Glass said, moving his right hand in a wide arc across the desktop as if to sweep the subject aside; the gesture made him think of footage of Richard Nixon, sweating on the evening news all those years ago, insisting he was not a crook. The studios were so harshly lit in those days of paranoia and recrimination they had made pretty well everyone look like a villain in an old Eastmancolor movie. “I should tell you,” Glass said, “that Mr. Mulholland will give you no assistance. And I don’t want you to approach him. Don’t call, don’t write. Understand?”

Riley smirked and bit his lower lip, which made him look all the more like—what was it? A squirrel? No. Close, but no. “You haven’t told him,” Riley said, “have you. About me, I mean.”

Glass ignored that. “I’m not asking you to be a muckraker,” he said. “I don’t expect Mr. Mulholland to have guilty secrets. He was an undercover agent, but he’s not a crook, in case you think I think he is.”

“No,” Riley said, “he’s your father-in-law.”

Glass was breathing heavily again. “That’s something I’d like you to forget about,” he said, “when you come to do your researches.” He sat back on his chair and studied the young man. “How will you go about it—researching, I mean?”

Riley laced his long pale fingers over his concave stomach and this time rocked himself gently backward and forward in the swivel chair, making the ball-and-socket mechanism underneath the seat squeal tinily, *EEK, eek*.

“Well,” Riley said with a smirk, “let’s say I go way beyond Wikipedia.”

“But you’ll use . . . computers, and so on?” Glass did not possess even a cell phone.

“Oh, yes, computers,” Riley said, making his big eyes bigger still, mocking the older man, “all sorts of wizard gadgets, don’t you know.”

Glass wondered if that was supposed to be a British accent. Did Riley think he was English? Well, let him.

He imagined lighting up: the match flaring, the lovely tang of sulphur, and then the harsh smoke searing his throat.

“I want to ask you something,” Riley said, thrusting his pinhead forward on its tall stalk of neck. “Why did you agree to it?”

“What?”

“To write Big Bill’s biography.”

“I don’t think that’s any of your business,” Glass said sharply. He looked out at the misty rain. He had moved permanently from Dublin to New York six months previously, he had an apartment on Central Park West and a house on Long Island—or at least his wife had—yet he had still not got used to what he thought of as the New York Jeer. The fellow on the street corner selling you a hot dog would say, “Thanks, bud,” and manage to make it sound merrily derisive. How did they keep it going, this endless, amused, argumentative squaring up to each other and everyone else?

“Tell me,” he said, “what you know about Mr. Mulholland.”

“For free?” Riley grinned again, then leaned back and looked at the ceiling, fingering the tuft of hair on his chin. “William ‘Big Bill’ Mulholland. South Boston Irish, second generation. Father ran off when wee Willie was a kid, mother took in laundry, scrubbed floors. In school William got straight As, impressed the priests, was an altar boy, the usual. Tough, though—any pedophile cleric coming near

Bill Mulholland would likely have lost his balls. Put himself through Boston College. Engineering. At college was recruited into the CIA, became a working operative in the late forties. Electronic surveillance was his specialty. Korea, Latin America, Europe, Vietnam. Then he had a run-in with James Jesus Angleton over Angleton's obsessive distrust of the French—Big Bill was posted to the Company's Paris bureau at the time. In those days one did not incur the displeasure"—again that hopeless attempt at a British accent—"of James Jesus without getting cut off at the knees, which is what would have happened to Bill Mulholland if he hadn't got out before Angleton could give him the shove, or worse. That was the late sixties."

He pushed himself up out of the chair, unwinding himself like a fakir's rope, and shambled to the glass wall and stood looking out, his hands thrust into the back pockets of his jeans. He went on: "After he left the Company, Big Bill got into the then-blossoming communications business, where he put his training as a spook to good use when he set up Mulholland Cable and right away began to make shitloads of money. It wasn't until twenty years later that he had to bring in his protégé Charlie Varriker to save the firm from going bust." He paused, and without turning said: "You'll know about Big Bill's matrimonial adventures, I guess? In 1949 he married the world's most famous redhead, Vanessa Lane, Hollywood actress, if that's the word, and in 1949 the marriage was duly dissolved"—now he grinned over his shoulder at Glass—"ain't love just screwy?"

He went back to contemplating the misted city and was silent for a moment, thinking. "You know," he said, "he's such a CIA cliché I wonder if the CIA didn't invent him. Look at his next marriage, in '58, to Claire Thorpington Eliot, of the Boston Eliots—that was some step up the social ladder for Billy the Kid from Brewster Street. He had, as you will know, one child only, a daughter, Louise, by the second Mrs. Mulholland. Miz Claire, as this grand lady was called,

died in a hunting accident—balking horse, broken neck—in April 1961, on the eve, as bloody-minded Fate would have it, of the invasion of the Playa Girón, otherwise known as the Bay of Pigs, a venture in which Big Bill was sunk up to his neck. The grieving widower returned from the shores of Florida to find the Eliots already moving his things, including his two-year-old daughter, out of the grand old family mansion in Back Bay.”

He turned and walked back and slumped down in the chair and again turned his eyes to the ceiling. “Next thing,” he said, “Big Bill was married a third time, to Nancy Harrison, writer, journalist, and Martha Gellhorn—look-alike, and living with her on a fine estate in County Somewhere on the west coast of Ireland, not an Oscar statuette’s throw from the home of his old friend and drinking buddy John Huston. Grand days, by all accounts, but bound to end, like all such. Blond Nancy couldn’t take the endless rain and the low-browed natives and packed up her Remington and hightailed it for sunnier climes—Ibiza, Clifford Irving, Orson Welles, all that.” He stopped, and lowered his glossy gaze from the ceiling and fixed on Glass. “You want more, I got more. And I haven’t even looked into the crystal ball of my laptop yet.”

“What did you do,” Glass said, “rehearse this stuff before you came up here?”

A sharp something came into the young man’s look, a resentful edge. “I have a photographic memory.”

“Useful, in your trade,” Glass said.

“Yeah.”

He was, Glass saw, sulking. His professional honor had been questioned. It was good to know where he was vulnerable.

Glass rose, a finger braced against the desktop for balance, and launched himself cautiously out into the room. At each step that he took he felt he was about to fall over, and had the impression that he

was yawing sideways irresistibly in the direction of the glass wall and the gulp-inducing nothingness beyond. Would he ever become accustomed to this cloud-capped tower?

“I can see,” he said, “I’ve picked the right person. Because what I want is detail—the kind of thing I’m not going to have the time to find for myself, or the inclination, frankly.”

“No,” Riley said from the leather depths of his chair, still sounding surly, “detail was never your strong point, was it?”

What struck Glass was not so much the implied insult as the tense in which it was couched. Was this how everyone would see it, that by agreeing to write his father-in-law’s biography he had renounced his calling as a journalist? If so, they would be wrong, though once again it was a matter of tense. For he had already given up journalism, before ever Big Bill had approached him with an offer it would have been foolish to refuse. His reports on Northern Ireland during the Troubles, on the massacre in Tiananmen Square, on the Rwandan genocide, on the Intifada, on that bloody Saturday afternoon in Srebrenica, not so much reports as extended and passionately fashioned jeremiads—there would be no more of them. Something had ceased in him, a light had been extinguished, he did not know why. It was simply that: he had burned out. An old story. He was a walking cliché. “I want you to write this thing, son,” Big Bill had said to him, laying a hand on his shoulder, “not only because *I* trust you, but because others do, too. I don’t want a hagiography—I don’t merit one, I’m no saint. What I want is the truth.” And Glass had thought: Ah, the truth.

“It’s not going to be easy for you,” he said now to the young man lounging in the shell-shaped chair.

“How’s that?”

“I don’t want Mr. Mulholland to come to hear of you and what you’re doing. You understand?”

He turned—too quickly, making his head spin—and gave Dylan



Riley what he hoped was a hard look. But Riley was gazing at the ceiling again, gnawing on the nail of his left little finger, and might not have been listening.

“That’s my job,” Riley said, “to be discreet. Anyway, you’d be surprised how much information—detail, as you say—is on record, if you know where to look for it.”

Glass suddenly wanted to be rid of the fellow. “Have you a standard contract?” he asked brusquely.

“A contract? I don’t do contracts.” Riley smiled slyly. “I trust you.”

“Oh, yes? I didn’t think you’d trust anyone, given the nature of your work.”

Riley stood up from the chair and adjusted the crotch of his sagging jeans with scooping gestures of both hands. He really was an unappetizing person. “‘The nature of my work?’” he said. “I’m a researcher, Mr. Glass. That’s all.”

“Yes, but you find things out, and surely sometimes the things you find out are not to the taste of your employers, never mind the people they are having researched.”

Riley gave him a long, piercing look, putting his head on one side and narrowing his eyes. “You said Big Bill has no guilty secrets.”

“I said I expect none.”

“I’m here to tell you, everybody has secrets, mostly guilty ones.”

Glass turned toward the door, drawing the young man with him. “You’ll get to work straightaway,” he said, a statement not a question. “When can I expect to hear from you?”

“I’ve got to get my head around this, get organized, decide priorities. Then we’ll talk again.” By now Glass had the door open. The much used air in the corridor smelled faintly of burnt rubber. “I’ve got to get my head around *you*, too,” Riley said, with a suddenly bitter laugh. “I used to read you, you know, in the *Guardian*, in *Rolling*

*Stone*, the *New York Review*. And now you're writing Big Bill Mullolland's life story." He inflated his cheeks and released the air in them with a tiny, plosive sound. "Wow," he said, and turned away.

Glass shut the door and walked back to his desk, and when he reached it, as if at a signal, the telephone rang. "This is Security, Mr. Glass. Your wife is here."

For a moment Glass said nothing. He touched the chair Dylan Riley had sat in, and again it made its tiny protest: *eek, eek*. The young man had left a definite odor on the air, a grayish, rank spoor.

A lemur! That was the creature Dylan Riley resembled. Yes, of course. A lemur.

"Tell her to come up," John Glass said.