Château Scientology

Inside the Church's Celebrity Centre

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by Dana Goodyear

Franklin Avenue, skimming past the mouths of Hollywood's eastern canyons, at the disappearing far-north edge of city maps, forms a halfhearted high street for the apartment dwellers clustered on its banks. Public life happens in the Mayfair grocery store, and in a block-long stretch of sidewalk cafés and used-book stores. The apartment buildings are old, and in some cases beautiful, like the Villa Carlotta, a late-nineteen-twenties Mediterranean-style structure designed by Arthur Harvey, where the architect Wallace Neff lived for many years.

Across from the Villa Carlotta is the avenue's defining anomaly: a monumental turreted castle, also designed by Harvey, on a three-acre site, with formal gardens, a bubbling stream, a tennis court, and a pair of rubber trees that are more than a hundred years old. Seven stories tall, the castle is an overgrown folly the color of farm cream, with swaying long-necked palms that seem to graze its roofs. "You want to circle the block and look at it," Richardson Robertson III, a local architect, says. "It's unusual in the modern-box world we live in to see so many nooks and crannies and little windows and interesting roof lines." Built as the Château Élysée, a long-term residential hotel for movie stars, it is considered by preservationists to be one of the city's grandest Norman-revival buildings. (The Château Marmont is smaller and sits on considerably less land.) Since 1973, the Château Élysée has been owned by the Church of Scientology, which calls it Celebrity Centre.

Scientology, the religion that grew out of L. Ron Hubbard's popular self-help manual "Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health," incorporates aspects of Eastern philosophy, management theory, and science fiction-a genre in which Hubbard was prolific. The first Scientology church was established in downtown Los Angeles, in 1954. Although the Church's spiritual headquarters are in Clearwater, Florida, and it has facilities around the world, Scientology is most deeply associated with Los Angeles and its entertainment industry. The dozens of local buildings owned by the Church, many of them historically significant and now prominently marked with posters advertising "Dianetics" or with the eight-pointed cross that serves as one of Scientology's symbols, have entered the landscape of iconic L.A. architecture as a visually stimulating mash of old Hollywood and seventies-style art direction and signage. At Celebrity Centre, where a large yellow sign affixed to a south-facing roof overlooking the 101 Freeway announces the building and its owner, this juxtaposition is especially acute. Diane Kanner, an architectural historian who specializes in twentieth-century Los Angeles, calls the building Château Scientology.

From the outset, the conversion of celebrities was important to Scientology. An internal newsletter produced by the Hubbard Communications Office, probably in the mid-fifties, asserts, "There are many to whom America and the world listens. On the backs of these are carried most of the enthusiasms on which the society runs." It goes on, "It is obvious what would happen to America if we helped its leaders to help others. Project Celebrity is part of that program. It is obvious what would happen to Scientology if prime communicators benefitting from it would mention it now and then." The piece concludes with a list of the day's stars-Orson Welles, Howard Hughes, Walt Disney, and Greta Garbo among them-referring to them as "game" and "quarry" for Scientologists to "hunt." Though Scientology is not known to have had success with this early group, the movement now counts Tom Cruise, John Travolta, Kirstie Alley, and many other celebrities as members.

Celebrity Centre is used for Scientology courses and for "auditing," a mainstay of the religion, in which a person undergoes a guided talk-therapy session, usually while holding a device known as an E-Meter, which is supposed to measure one's spiritual state. The goal is to eliminate "mental image pictures" associated with traumatic events; when a person is "Clear"-freed of all such associations-he can advance to the mystical and esoteric levels of Scientology. The path to becoming an "Operating Thetan," or pure spiritual being ("thetan" being Hubbard's word for the soul), is laid out in a table called "The Bridge to Total Freedom: Scientology Classification Gradation and Awareness Chart of Levels and Certificates." Scientology is a technological religion and claims to have developed "exact, precise methods to increase man's spiritual awareness and capability." Completion of the Bridge takes years, and each stage requires a cash investment. An initial twelve-and-a-half-hour auditing session costs between six and seven hundred dollars, Greg LaClaire, a vice-president of Celebrity Centre, says. (Aspiring Scientologists can mitigate the expense by choosing to be audited by a fellow initiate rather than by a staff member.) In the Holiday 2007 Dianetics and Scientology catalogue, a deluxe Planetary Dissemination Edition E-Meter-billed as a "tool for Golden Age of Tech certainty," to assist in "faster progress up The Bridge"-was offered, in "Diamond Blue," for five thousand five hundred dollars.

On Celebrity Centre's upper floors, there are thirty-nine hotel rooms to accommodate visiting Scientologists. An undated leaflet advertising "a safe environment for Celebrities and Scientologists" contains a plug from Travolta: "Good rest, good food, good service but most of all I felt very safe in this space"; Celebrity, a magazine produced by Celebrity Centre, which features a Scientology celebrity on the cover of every issue, urges readers to stay at the hotel for five to six weeks "to complete your Basics books & lectures courses faster!" In the basement, there's a drug detox facility. The castle also fosters a feeling of community. "Hollywood's not a very easy industry to bust into," Hilary Royce, a former dancer who went to Sarah Lawrence and is now the director of community affairs for the Church of Scientology International, told me. "Any artist at Celebrity Centre would tell you it's a safe place to study scripts, to network. It's really a hub."

The promise of connectedness attracts many Hollywood hopefuls. Celebrity Centre offers a range of Success in the Industry Seminars-Breaking Into Commercials, How to Get Cast in the Pilot Season, Hollywood Acting Class-which it promotes with flyers posted at auditions around town. A former actor I spoke with told me that when he first got to Hollywood, a decade ago, he went to Celebrity Centre for what "seemed like a legitimate industry workshop," only to find that "it was more or less an opportunity for them to solicit people."

"I stood in the foyer and watched this massive indoctrination presentation, where Marissa Ribisi, Juliette Lewis, and a casting director came out talking about how great it is to be in Scientology," he said. "This celebrity panel was confirming that the people in the audience could in fact realize their dreams if they took courses and got 'Clear.' Then I was followed by auditors, who tried to get me to go into another room and get audited. It was a pervasive, invasive type of sales pitch. I started to get really pissed, and then they started to say that my stress was causing discomfort in my life."

"Those seminars are absolutely, utterly, entirely an introduction to Scientology," Greg LaClaire told me. "They are an introductory service of the Church." But he said that he found the actor's account otherwise suspect. "There's so much interest in Scientology. We really, really, really don't have any inclination or the time to talk to someone who's not interested."

A longside glowing testimonials from people-celebrities and not-who credit Scientology for personal transformation, there are stories of savings spent, lives derailed, critics harassed. Non-Scientologists tend to get a thrill from the aura of coercion and seduction-not to mention kitsch-that clings to the Church. To them, the castle is a particular object of fascination, a magnificent confection that must not be tasted. The offerings of its kitchen are another matter. Celebrity Centre's restaurant, the Renaissance, is open to anyone who cares to eat there. A Hollywood producer, who asked that I not use her name in case she ever needs to deal with John Travolta's agent, recalled a brunch at the Renaissance some years ago, attended by non-Scientologist movie executives, agents, directors, and actors. "Everyone was titillated," the producer said. "It was like going to the foreign land and seeing the exotic people." In this case, she said, that meant some peculiar waiters, who repeatedly photographed them, rather than any recognizable celebrity. After the brunch, the producer and her friends asked for a tour of the building, and were taken upstairs to a penthouse suite where, they were told, Ginger Rogers used to stay. "The room is totally tricked out," the producer said. "There were these two little old ladies, who were obviously Scientologists, oohing and ahing." As the tour moved on, the producer and her boyfriend dallied. "We actually considered getting on the bed and having sex. I so wish that we had done that. Imagine being frog-marched out of the Celebrity Centre for getting busted having sex in the Ginger Rogers suite!"

Two years ago, Julien Nitzberg, a writer and director, decided to have a fortieth-birthday dinner at the Renaissance. His friend John Dutton, an architect, said that he was delighted at the chance to see the inside of the building. "I had always wanted to go there out of architectural curiosity, but you hear stories about people who go in and don't come out," he said. "I wasn't about to knock on the front door." It was a cold, dark night in early December. "The Christmas lights were going up. It was like a theme park-well manicured and clean and very carefully arranged and designed," Dutton recounted dreamily. The Renaissance was nearly empty, the wine served warm. The waiters seemed like actors impersonating waiters. Dutton and his fiancée, not relishing being in the deserted building late at night, left right after dinner. Others in the group went for a tour, and at the end were taken into separate rooms and asked if they would like to sign up for an introductory course. Nitzberg recalled that one of the tour guides kept saying things like "Woooo, it's so spooky, we're Scientologists," and wiggling his fingers at them. Late that night, Nitzberg sent Dutton's fiancée an e-mail from home:

Subject: I just hacked this computer.

We are locked in the Centre and can't get out. Come back and save us immediately!!

When I went to Celebrity Centre in December, for "Christmas Stories," an annual variety show, which, like the Renaissance, is open to the public but attended mainly by Scientologists, I detected nothing more threatening than a familiar air of Hollywood clubbiness. The stage, in a large iron-and-glass orangery known as the Garden Pavilion, was dressed to resemble the set of a nineteen-thirties radio show, with an electric "On Air" sign, a wide-mouthed fireplace stacked with logs and laden with red poinsettias, and a giant Christmas tree decorated with red and gold ornaments. The audience, with the exception of a couple of heavily made-up women in slinky, discover-me! attire, looked like typical NPR-listening folks. An actor named Jim Meskimen played the jovial m.c., introducing four ample men in red cummerbunds and bow ties-"the Chairmen of the Chord"-who sang "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer." There were sketches about the writers' strike, and then Lynsey Bartilson and Patrick Renna spoofed Frosty the Snowman (Renna, as Frosty: "The last thing I remember, I was a glass of water at the Four Seasons in Pasadena!") with a cast of children drawn from Celebrity Centre's song-and-dance troupe, Kids on Stage for a Better World. Jenna Elfman came out dressed as an elf, in striped tights and a green hat, along with a pigtailed Kelly Preston, also in an elf costume; at the end of their skit, about being laid off by Santa, Ella Bleu Travolta (Preston's daughter, with John Travolta) appeared, a confident child with glossy dark hair in a red hoodie, to tell them they could have their jobs back. At intermission, cookies and hot cider were served.

The highlight of Act II was Kirstie Alley, in a formal green gown, making fat jokes while pretending to judge the Westminster Tree Show. (Her children, True and Lillie Parker, wore Christmas-tree costumes.) The evening was short on L.R.H., as Hubbard is affectionately known to his disciples; a Hubbard quote on the back of the program, where Tom Cruise and John Travolta were thanked as benefactors, was so unobjectionable as to be trite: "When children become unimportant to a society, that society has forfeited its future." Proceeds from the tickets (seventy-five dollars for a reserved seat) benefitted the Hollywood Police Activities League, and went toward holiday gifts for underprivileged children in the neighborhood.

A newspaper story from 1928 announcing the plans for the Château Élysée reported, "A grassed moat will surround the building. Drawbridge entrances will lead into its lobby and corridor and armorial subjects will illuminate the vaulted ceiling." There were also six-paned casement windows and gargoyles in the eaves. But the Gothic aura of the château, which cost just under a million dollars to construct, was always more than architectural.

The château was built by Eleanor Ince, on land she had owned with her husband, Thomas Ince, a silent-film pioneer who was known as the Father of the Western. In the teens, the Inces homesteaded on the property in a one-story ranch house decorated with Indian headdresses and Western gear. On Ince's forty-third birthday, in 1924, he was invited onto William Randolph Hearst's yacht, with Charlie Chaplin, Louella Parsons, Hearst, and Hearst's girlfriend, Marion Davies. While on board, Ince fell ill; he died at home a few days later.

Some time after Ince's death, rumors emerged that Hearst had murdered him upon discovering him with Davies. This sinister version of events, which includes the speculation that Eleanor built the Château Élysée with hush money from Hearst, was immortalized in Kenneth Anger's "Hollywood Babylon," and persists-promoted by noir tours of Hollywood-to the Ince family's dismay. "People said that Hearst gave Eleanor the money," Marc Wanamaker, a Hollywood historical consultant who has worked with the Inces, says. "No. She was vice-president of Ince Studios and a partner in the business. She sold the assets to friends and built the Château Élysée, where she lived in a big suite. She invited friends-retired silent actors and actresses-to live there, in a five-star apartment house."

Throughout the thirties and forties, the château was an industry hangout. Luminaries who stayed there include Errol Flynn, Carole Lombard, Katharine Hepburn, and Cary Grant, and the Church invokes its Hollywood lore proudly. In the reception area of the Renaissance hangs a framed menu from 1937 (creamed turnips, gooseberry cobbler, a filet-mignon dinner for a dollar-fifty), discovered in the attic by the building manager, Art Medeiros. "This was the dining room when Humphrey Bogart would've eaten here," Medeiros told me. "This was the primo place in town." It's as if Falun Gong bought the Algonquin and advertised the gin Martinis that Dorothy Parker used to drink, but the Church's emphasis on the entertainment industry has made the building's transition to its current use seem almost logical. Ken Bernstein, the head of the city's Office for Historic Resources, put it this way: "Celebrities equivalent to today's Scientology celebrities-people who had that level of glamour and prestige-were significantly associated with that building."

The Church of Scientology bought the Château Élysée for a million dollars from a group affiliated with the First Congregational Church of Los Angeles, which had been using it since the nineteen-fifties as a retirement home. The building was run-down, with rebar poking through its shell, and, as studios moved to the valley and stars moved to Bel Air and the beach, the neighborhood, too, was becoming increasingly desolate. The Church used volunteers and staff for the restoration. Stephen Kent, a sociologist at the University of Alberta who specializes in alternative religions and has interviewed many former Scientologists, told me that "much of the labor that renovated the Celebrity Centre was performed by people on the R.P.F., or Rehabilitation Project Force, who often worked dangerously long hours for almost no pay." (Bob Adams, a former N.F.L. tight end who is the vice-president of the Church of Scientology International, said that the R.P.F.-which is sometimes characterized by critics as a punishment for Church staff members who get out of line-is a volunteer program for self-improvement. "They get frequent breaks, eight hours of sleep, and three healthy meals," he said. "The principal part is auditing, but the physical activity is very extrovertive for the individual and is found to be very therapeutic in itself." Besides, he said, the R.P.F. furnished only a portion of the labor for Celebrity Centre and worked alongside professional contractors.) In the late eighties, the city designated the château a historic-cultural monument and effectively prevented the Church from gutting it. "I think somebody noticed that we were prettying it up, and that's when the historians got involved," Medeiros says.

The acquisition of the Château Élysée marked the beginning of a spending spree by the Church in Hollywood. In 1977, it bought the expansive Art-Deco Cedars of Lebanon Hospital, near Silver Lake, and painted it a chalky azure color. The complex, which comprises ten buildings on and around L. Ron Hubbard Way-including the American Saint Hill Organization, a Scientology college-is known to Church members as Pacific Area Command.

Hollywood Boulevard, too, is a major stronghold. In 1979, the Church bought the Christie Hotel, a 1923 Georgian-revival, and the adjacent lot, where the chic Club New Yorker, owned by the actor Jean Malin, used to be. In the mid-eighties, the Church bought a 1923 bank building near Grauman's Chinese, as an office for Author Services, a literary agency that manages the publication and translation of L. Ron Hubbard's work, and in 2000 it acquired the late-forties mission-style church next door. In 1988 came the Guaranty Bank, a twelve-story 1925 Italianate Beaux-Arts building where Hedda Hopper once had an office. Now it houses the L. Ron Hubbard Life Exhibition and the office of the Church's international management, as well as an office of its Religious Technology Center, which holds the trademarks for Dianetics and Scientology, and, according to Church literature, "was created to meet the need to ensure the standard application of the technology and to eliminate any possibility of Scientology falling into the wrong hands." R.T.C. is run by David Miscavige, the most powerful figure to emerge in the Church since Hubbard's death, in 1986.

Across the street is the former Regal Shoe store, a pinkish-beige nineteen-forties streamline-moderne structure, with papered-over and black-curtained windows, bought by the Church in 1996 and used by its in-house architecture-and-design team. Four years ago, the Church spent $4.6 million on the El Cadiz, a gracious 1937 Spanish-style garden-apartment complex just off the boulevard. Six months later, the city-perhaps concerned for the building's fate-designated it a historic-cultural monument. The boulevard is also marked by more covert references to the Church's reach. The marquee of the shuttered Vogue theatre reads, "NOW LORD XEMU," presumably a prankster's allusion to one of the more mysterious aspects of what is widely believed to be Scientology's cosmology. Shrouded in secrecy and said to be intended only for upper-level Operating Thetans, it involves a malevolent galactic warrior known as Xenu or Xemu. (When I asked Bob Adams about Xemu, he said, "A small fraction of our scriptures are confidential, and I don't want to allude to something confidential.")

In the seventies and eighties, the Church, despite its fortifying real-estate acquisitions, found itself besieged. Dissatisfied former members alleged financial and psychological abuse; some asked for their money back. Journalists wrote exposés. Lawsuits abounded. Fighting to regain the church's tax-free status (which was revoked in the late sixties and eventually reinstated), Scientologists infiltrated government offices, stole documents, and bugged an I.R.S. meeting. In the investigation, Celebrity Centre and the Cedars of Lebanon complex were searched by the F.B.I., and L. Ron Hubbard's wife was sentenced to four years in prison for her role in the conspiracy. But for the Church of Scientology, a new religion with limitless ambition and a sharp awareness of the importance of image, rehabilitating elegant old buildings serves both as a powerful means of repairing its reputation and as a tangible metaphor for that work. It has spent tens of millions of dollars on seismic upgrades and historic restoration of its Hollywood properties, and would have spent far more had it paid market rates. The exteriors of its buildings are spotless, and many of them are watched over by twenty-four-hour cameras and security guards. "They do it to enhance their visual status," Robert W. Nudelman, the director of preservation at Hollywood Heritage, told me.

By the time the Church began to buy on Hollywood Boulevard, most other investors had fled, and the street belonged to dealers, runaways, and bums. Tourists came on coaches, saw the Walk of Fame, and got straight back on the bus. The Church of Scientology was one of the few things going; often, in those days, theirs were the only lights on after dark. Meanwhile, the Church worked to identify itself with the dream-factory aspect of Hollywood, both through its celebrity adherents and by promoting L. Ron Hubbard's gig, in the late thirties, as a writer of pre-feature cliffhangers and serials. (At one point, Hubbard's followers tried to get a star for him on the Walk of Fame, in recognition of his work in the industry.) It made little difference to the Church that Hollywood the neighborhood no longer had much to do with the entertainment industry. "Hollywood's blessing and its curse is that it's always been at once a place and an ideal," Eric Garcetti, the city-council member who represents Hollywood, says. "The Church of Scientology has always made those two things synonymous in its work. They consciously draw on the glamour of old Hollywood. They want to appeal to the creative community-actors, writers-and mine the best of that Hollywood ethos."

Nowadays, the Scientologists are part of the local establishment. The Church has hosted Chamber of Commerce mixers in its buildings; it helps out with an annual police- and fire-department barbecue, has a representative on the board of the Hollywood Arts Council and another on the board of the local business-improvement district, and maintains a strong presence in the Hollywood Thanksgiving-weekend parade. During the Christmas season, the lot next to the Christie is fashioned into "Winter Wonderland," a display with a towering fir tree and a resident Santa Claus on a faux-snow-and-glitter-encrusted set. "The longer they're here, the more credibility they have and the more respect," Leron Gubler, who runs the Chamber of Commerce, says. Kip Rudd, a senior planner at a city-redevelopment agency which came into Hollywood in the eighties to spur investment, says, "The Scientologists were the jewels along the boulevard in terms of keeping it vital. They've taken a variety of nice old buildings and maintained and upgraded them." Last year, the Los Angeles Business Journal gave the Church an award for adaptive reuse.

Other developers, encouraged by friendly politicians and incentives, have followed the Church's lead. "There's no question that people saw the beauty of old Hollywood in the buildings that they own and maintain," Garcetti says. "They helped many of us picture what a fully restored neighborhood might look like." The Broadway Hollywood, on the eastern end of the boulevard, a luxury apartment building whose interiors were designed by Kelly Wearstler, recently opened in an old department store. (Charlize Theron has reportedly bought a place there.) Night clubs have moved into the old storefronts and are attracting movie stars again. A W hotel is under construction. Hilary Royce, Scientology's community liaison, says that other property owners on the boulevard have come to the Church for advice about how to renovate their buildings. "We were some of the first people restoring our buildings to their original grandeur," she told me. "We were the real pioneers, no question, and we're proud of it."

Crossing the threshold of Celebrity Centre, you step over a cracked coat of arms embedded in the uppermost stair and a rounded script that reads, "Château Élysée." The Renaissance is directly on the right, in a delicately proportioned main room with an enclosed terrace. One afternoon in December, after an extensive tour of Scientology properties, I went to the Renaissance for lunch with Royce, Adams, and Greg LaClaire, of Celebrity Centre.

It was past two, and the place was empty, except for Girard, a lugubrious French maître d', and a pale young woman pouring ice water. We sat on the terrace, in carved-wood chairs with upholstered backs and seats, reproductions of the reproduction Louis XIV furniture found in the Château Élysée. I ordered lobster salad, and watched a security guard on a bike turn circles near a babbling fountain on the winter-brown lawn. A radio played fuzzy Christmas music. The Scientologists set about explaining the special role of the artist in society, and how, by enhancing the lives of artists, the Church enhances culture as a whole. LaClaire, who grew up in the Church and has worked at Celebrity Centre since he was nineteen, said, "There are a thousand people a week doing services here, each of them an artist or someone in one of the artistic industries, and twenty to twenty-five of these people are well known." He went on, "A huge percentage of Scientologists who are well known weren't well known before Scientology."

Royce mentioned that Hubbard had written on this subject, and excused herself from the table. She returned a few minutes later with a dusty green book, "Organization Executive Course, Public Division, Volume 6," part of a series written by Hubbard that is used in the management and standardization of all areas of Church activity. Royce read aloud from it: "Celebrity Centres should work to rehabilitate old or faded artists." She looked momentarily flummoxed, and began flipping through the pages, perhaps searching for something more ennobling. After a few more attempts, she closed the cover and set it down beside me. I opened the book. The pages were copies of typed memos by Hubbard. From 1971, the Celebrity Centre motto: "Real celebrities deserve the best in staff and service and image"; from 1973, "The purpose of Celebrity Centre is: to forward the expansion and popularization of Scientology through the arts, while remaining solvent and using highest quality tech." After a few moments, Royce took the book away, saying that I could find more helpful information in the glossy Celebrity Centre brochure.

Outside, a woman in work pants and a beige shirt maneuvered a wheelbarrow over a little bridge leading toward the Garden Pavilion. Earlier, Royce had said that if a non-artist or non-celebrity wanted to pursue Scientology at Celebrity Centre, "they wouldn't be turned away, but we might recommend a different church." Now she elaborated. "Here's the big picture with Scientology and Dianetics," she said. "The religion is expanding and expanding and there's a particular public and that public has needs. Celebrities are just a special public. They are. There's a celebrity public and a doctor public and a dentist public and a plumber public." She rambled on a bit, before returning to her original point. "The celebrity is a special public," she said. "We've got to help them."

Art Medeiros, the building manager, met us in the dining room and showed me molding, hand-painted in pastel colors by Church members, which he said had been refashioned from fragments found at the site. Hand-painted images of theatre masks, music stands, and dancing slippers decorated the walls. "We restored this room to be like the palace in Versailles," he said. "We sent a couple of our designers to France and they went to châteaus and hotels. They found that things were very eclectic in Europe, so we re-created that here. The renovations in this room added a lot more details and colors and stuff-before, it was a lot plainer. This was the first room to be done, in '87. It was a prototype for the rest. The historians loved this room. As you can see, it's a bit rococo, but it wasn't overboard." The Scientologists improve upon the past in the spirit of Sir Arthur Evans reconstructing the Palace of Knossos-call in the carpenters, fresco the walls, and suddenly the old heap looks like something. Nudelman, from Hollywood Heritage, who visited the building when it reopened, told me, "Subtlety was never really something I noticed with their work."

We walked down the hall-triple-coated with pink, cream, and salmon paint, applied to the walls with sea sponge-to the former lobby, where Church artisans had painted the ceiling with a trompe-l'oeil landscape of ancient columns dripping with vines. The walls were hung with colorful posters and flat-screen televisions playing videos to illustrate the major principles of Scientology. In a corner, near a roaring fire, was an E-Meter.

I saw lots of people in their twenties and thirties, casually but deliberately dressed, streaming downstairs, like college students let out of class, or gathered at a small outdoor café, smoking. I recognized Patrick Renna-Frosty-but no one else. In front of the elevator, there was a long-haired kid in expensive skate-inspired clothes, talking on a cell phone. Maybe he will be famous someday.

We took the elevator to the fourth floor, where the walls were decorated with paintings made by Scientologists in the style of seventeenth-century portraits. Medeiros let us into No. 407, a suite with a large living room, a kitchen, and a bedroom up a flight of stairs. "Kirstie Alley designed this suite," he said. "This is the Chinois, Oriental look." Bronze-and-blue Chinese toile wallpaper ran through the living room and kitchen and covered the hood of the oven. A porcelain statuette of an Asian woman formed the base of a lamp with a square bell shade. The kitchen cabinets were original, and painted white. A small-tiled sink was new but probably historically accurate, except for the metallic color of some of the tiles. "She went for gold," Medeiros said. "She wanted a little flash."

Upstairs, in the bedroom, there were silver-gelatin prints of Gloria Swanson, Mary Pickford, Rudolph Valentino. The floors were bamboo, in keeping with the Asian theme. Tasselled floor-to-ceiling drapes in robin's-egg blue were drawn back to reveal a green landscape of treetops and fronds. The late-afternoon sun made the Villa Carlotta and its tile roof glow orange. The Hollywood sign was visible high up on the hill. I stood there and tried to fix it in my mind. It was likely the best view of it I'll ever get.

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