

# **HATING OLIVIA**

**a novel by  
Mark SaFranko**

## **1.**

The war was over. I'd managed to avoid it, but it didn't mean a thing. Since that time -- when I wasn't on the dole or living off food stamps -- I'd worked every job under the sun: factory hand, chauffeur, reporter, bank clerk. I hadn't done any whack-ward time, but members of my immediate and extended family had. Major depression. Bizarre phobias. Alcoholism. Shock treatments. Suicide. All of which worried me -- genetics are everything. For months at a clip I wandered all over the country. The parade of forgettable days that made up the long, hazy years always seemed to be a matter of struggling to keep my head above water, and a roof over it. It was nothing much of a life.

After the sixties the world had gone to sleep again. The blue-collar suburbs were a drag, but unless you were a millionaire or willing to shack up with three or four other people you couldn't stand or would come to hate in a short time, Manhattan was out of the question. I was neither. That left me out in Jersey, holed up in the attic of a boarding house on sedate Park Street in the city of Montfleur at a rent of fifteen bucks per week, excluding telephone charges.

My room was a two-by-four number with a slanting roof that

## *Hating Olivia*

collided with my head a dozen times a day. In the jake were half a refrigerator and a bathtub -- not even a shower. There was something else -- cockroaches. Lots of them. The black dude next door, a short order cook by the name of Benny, shared the facilities with me, including the cockroaches. Benny was quiet and not there most of the time, which was okay by me. My window overlooked the train station. It seemed that every other week there was a suicide on the tracks that transported the commuters into the city. I often wondered if and when I would be next.

The landlords were an elderly couple by the name of Trowbridge. Lou, a bag of bones with glasses, happened to be a painter of uncommon talent. His nudes and landscapes decorated every square inch of the faded yellow walls. It looked to me as if he'd set out to become some kind of Sisley, or Francis Bacon even, but for whatever mysterious reason he'd fallen short of the mark, like most of us do. Lately he'd taken to carving fantastic totem poles of all styles and dimensions, an idea he'd picked up while visiting his son, an army officer stationed in Alaska. But whether from lack of business sense or sheer bad luck, the poor guy never sold a thing. A regular sad sack, he wore his defeat on his sleeve. Whenever I bumped into Lou in the hallways I could hardly coax two words out of him. He never even talked back when his wife chewed him out for one of his numerous peccadilloes. "How many times have I told you to keep the back door shut so the *cat* doesn't get out! Lou -- how could you be so *stupid!* Now who's going to chase that beast all over the neighborhood? Well -- what's your excuse? Nothing? Cat got your *tongue?* Oh, for Heaven's sake! What was I thinking when I married such a simp?" It was brutal to witness.

Myself, I didn't mind Mrs. Trowbridge. Despite my gig on

## *Hating Olivia*

the loading platform, I was forever in the arrears on the rent and she never said a word about it. Since she was a gimp and had trouble getting around, she sat in the parlor all day long with her ear pinned to the antique radio. Aside from the problem of her husband, she seemed content with her Puccini and Mahler and Mozart. Whenever I passed en route to my cell she had a joke for me.

“Max, you wouldn’t *believe* what that idiot husband of mine did today...!”

As I climbed the stairs listening to her tirade, I’d catch the man of the house cowering in the shadows. We’d nod at one another, both of us a little embarrassed.

I couldn’t say that I knew which end was up either. One day I pulled the number of an astrologer off the announcement board at a second-hand bookstore in Chelsea. I dialed it that evening, and set an appointment for the following week. Before she could cast my horoscope, she needed the date, time and place of my birth.

“December twenty-third, nineteen fifty at seven-eighteen p.m., Trenton, New Jersey...” I remembered the information from the official hospital record, which my mother had passed on to me years before.

No matter what, I figured, things couldn’t get much worse. I was smarting over the bloody breakup of an affair I’d been carrying on with the wife of an up and coming young attorney in the county prosecutor’s office. Months later, I still couldn’t get her out of my mind. Our dates had consisted of furtive meetings in a practice room in the music department at the college where she taught American literature. While trying to make do on the piano bench, Jane swore to me that she was going to leave her husband. But beyond fucking her, I didn’t quite know what I’d do with her if that actually happened,

## *Hating Olivia*

since I didn't have two nickels to rub together and she was used to some of the finer things. Once she came up to my garret and had a good look at the sagging mattress and rotting carpet, she backed off. She could see the invisible writing on those flaking walls, all right. A part-time musician. An aspiring writer. A truck-loading bum who liked to read books and listen to obscure records -- thanks, but no thanks.

Still and all, Jane haunted my dreams even months later. What made the loss unbearable was her beauty. I'd always had an eye for beauty -- fool that I was, I believed that it counted for something. Like a beggar who covets the palace of the kingdom, I wanted what I couldn't have. But I was tired of coveting the unattainable.

Most of the time when I wasn't stuffing the ass-end of a semi I lay around and read -- Conrad...Tolstoy...Hamsun...Henry Miller...Sartre...Camus...Hesse...the Zen masters...Nietzsche...Celine...whoever and whatever I could get my hands on, so long as they held a certain appeal for the outcast. I smoked cigarettes by the carton. I masturbated compulsively over the glossy centerfolds in *Playboy* and *Penthouse* and *Club International*. I wrote songs on the guitar. When I had a few bucks to spare I hit the bars and nightclubs.

The day of my celestial appointment arrived. I rode a bus into the Port Authority and jumped the empty A train to Brooklyn Heights. After wandering around in circles for a half-hour, I finally located Mrs. London's brownstone.

"You're late," she announced. It sounded like an accusation.

She was full and curvy and bleached blond and at one time she must have been attractive. But she was beyond that stage now.

I apologized for keeping her waiting. She showed me into

## *Hating Olivia*

the parlor, an airy space decorated with birdcages and stuffed furniture and expensive-looking collectibles and souvenirs, all suffused with that singular, muted Brooklyn light. It struck me that Mrs. London had some change to spare.

We sat at a large, circular oak table. She pulled my hand-drawn chart out of a folder and positioned it in front of herself. Catching a glimpse of the abstruse squiggles, I was all set to hear how my life was about to take a turn for the better, maybe even a spectacular leap forward that would result in fulfillment, prosperity, fame, and maybe even a little money, though I never gave a damn about that; at the very least a few beautiful, adoring women who wouldn't put me through the trials of Job.

I lit a cigarette and waited while Mrs. London gathered her thoughts. I glanced at her fingertips, which had been painted with scarlet nail polish, then at her tits, which bulged against her crepe sundress. My cock stirred in my jeans.

"Ah. *Now* I see the problem. You're under a curse for the next five years, Mister Max."

"What?"

"I don't mean to alarm you, but you're about to enter the most difficult period of the thirty-year cycle of Saturn. Some call it the 'obscure' period. The ringed planet -- harbinger of fate and destiny -- is about to cross into your tropical ascendant."

Bull flop. "You must have gotten something wrong," I protested.

She pointed at the southeastern quadrant of the circle.

"Right here. You will undergo many severe trials. It won't be easy. At times you'll think you might not make it. You're going to have to come to grips with yourself. You'll have to sink all the way

## *Hating Olivia*

down to the bottom before finding your way out of the black hole. Prepare yourself for the long, dark night of the soul.”

I had no interest in sinking to the bottom of anything. Shit -- wasn't I already there?

I was speechless. I didn't believe a word of it -- this stuff was all mumbo-jumbo. What made me think it was anything different?

I lit another smoke. “Any chance you're wrong?”

“It's possible. Anything is possible. But it's not likely. Only the masters have the power to overcome the influence of the planets. Think of Paramahansa Yogananda, or Krishnamurti. And even they had their share of troubles.”

A telephone rang somewhere. Mrs. London got up from the table.

“Be right back.”

I could make out her ass jiggling beneath the crepe as she walked toward the back of the apartment. It was a very nice ass. It disappeared into another room.

If she was a *Mrs.*, where was her husband? The phone stopped ringing. “Oh, hello, Donald....I'm with someone now, but let me see if I can give you a few minutes....”

Palm over the mouthpiece, Mrs. London popped her head out.

“I have to take this. You don't mind waiting?”

I shook my head. Where the hell did I have to be? She slid the door half-shut, but I could still see part of her as she sat at her desk back there. Her bare leg was sticking out from her bunched-up dress, and the line of her panties was visible beneath the flimsy material. I could still hear her voice, too. She went on about where Mars was in the heavens today, and how Uranus was afflicting

## *Hating Olivia*

Donald's Mercury and that was causing whatever problems he was having.

It had been months since I'd gotten laid. Between that ugly fact and the heat, I was a crazed jackal. I would have made a move on Mrs. London, but she was the all-business type, no hint of flirtation there at all. Besides, she showed no personal interest in me whatsoever.

But as usual, my dick was like a billy club just from seeing a woman's naked flesh. The damned thing was straining like a caged beast to get free. I reached down and undid my fly. It popped right out from the leg of my underwear. Since Mrs. London was easing into her phone-counseling session, I figured why not....It was one of those days when I only needed a hard stroke or two to get there. I beat it in time to the slap of Mrs. London's sandal against her pedicured foot. When she started in on Pluto's ingress into Donald's eighth house, which happens to govern the sex drive, I was riding her like a dog, and she didn't even know it.

My trunk arched. I was a silent rocket launcher....

*Boom. Boom. Boom. Boom. Boom.*

The first missile landed on the rim of the table. The following volleys drifted through the air squiggling like baby snakes and fell to the carpet with a soft plop. I immediately tucked my organ back into my jeans and reached into my pocket for my handkerchief. I wiped the table clean, then moved my sneaker onto the jizm on the carpet and ground it in. Then I sat back and waited. Mrs. London never knew what hit her.

When she got back, she proceeded to analyze my personality, and then say a few things about my past. But I'd already tuned out. The Sibyl's dire warnings hung now like an ominous cloud above

## *Hating Olivia*

my head. The expectant mood I'd carried in was gone -- she'd annihilated it. Suddenly I felt like Ishmael. Or a leper.

At precisely one hour her egg timer went off. She slid the chart across the table to me.

“That'll be twenty-five dollars.”

By now I was thoroughly deflated. “I meant to tell you up front...I'm a little short on cash. Would you mind if I sent it to you in a week or so, when my next paycheck comes in?”

Mrs. London's green cat's eyes narrowed with suspicion. “All right. Next Thursday at the latest. Make sure you leave me your telephone number.”

I wrote it down. She saw me to the door. The street was as quiet as a morgue. As lots of people said, Brooklyn was a place for nonbelievers. And, as someone once wrote, it was only known by the dead.

It was August. It was very hot. I was due at work in a few hours.

## **2.**

That night it must have been a hundred and fifty degrees Fahrenheit inside the trailer I'd been assigned to. The truck had rolled up from Arkansas or Mississippi or some other godforsaken place like that, and was filled to the rafters with the fattest, heaviest packages I'd ever set eyes on. My job was to haul the cargo to the conveyor belt at the rear of the vehicle. When I was finished with this baby, there was another waiting, where I would reverse the process. Nothing but lugging boxes back and forth until six in the

## *Hating Olivia*

morning.

I'd started at the depot a few months back after running out of jack for the thousandth time. Kleingrosse, the floor boss, had taken one look at all six feet, one hundred seventy-five pounds of me and gave me the nastiest jobs. Since he was management, he wore a shirt and tie and jacket and never got his hands dirty. Needless to say, he wasn't my favorite fellow.

At three that morning I took my fifteen for a smoke and a cold Coke. In the harsh light of the lunchroom I noticed my hands. They were glazed with a sticky orange substance. Within seconds they were on fire. One of the packages must have been leaking a contraband substance, acid or astringent.

I went running to the medic's station and stuck out my paws for the guy on duty.

"Wash with soap and water," he shrugged without taking his eyes off his Superman comic book. "That should do the trick."

I hurried to the john and followed his instructions, but the burning sensation continued. Even under the cascade of cold water, it felt like the vile stuff was about to sear the flesh off my bones.

I marched over to the central dispatch desk and asked Kleingrosse to let me go for the night.

"Occupational hazard," he sniffed. "I can't let you go. I'm short two guys tonight as it is. You walk out of here, you forfeit your pay."

I looked at his clean fingernails, his neatly combed hair. That was all I could do. Whenever they have you by the balls, that's all you *can* do.

*You fucking asshole. You big fucking asshole.*

I was fuming. But I returned to my truck anyway, cursing all

## *Hating Olivia*

the way. That's life -- when you gotta have the money, you gotta have the money. All five bucks an hour.

Somehow I managed to make it through to the end of my shift. I was too exhausted to go someplace for a beer, so I jumped into my wreck and drove back to Park Street, where I sucked down gallon after gallon of water like a camel. I was sweat-drenched from head to toe. Even my work boots were saturated -- they squished when I walked back and forth to the sink for refills.

As usual, I watched the sun come up through the porthole. Already a few commuters were gathered on the station platform below, waiting with their *Wall Street Journals* and styrofoam cups for the six thirty-eight train. Sure, I was glad I wasn't one of them -- but where the hell was I?

*Somehow I've got to get out of this*, I told myself. But how? I didn't have the money for Paris, and besides, nobody went there anymore. And I damned sure didn't have the savings to take an early retirement.

I stripped naked, dunked myself in the bathtub, then stretched out on the narrow mattress. Outside the window the sky was painted robin's egg blue. Summer had made it so stifling up here on the fifth floor I could hardly breathe. I was sweating all over again and it was only seven-thirty. My hands were as crimson as boiled lobsters and still faintly burning. I leaned over and switched on my ancient, dust-coated portable electric fan. Then I closed my eyes and tried to find a dream.

--- END OF SAMPLE ---

**Full Version Available on Amazon and MurderSlim.com**