

My Fling with the “King”

BY PAT MONTANDON

In 1966 I was living on San Francisco’s famous, crooked Lombard Street and involved in a television career and writing a book. When friends mentioned that Mel Belli wanted a date with me, I didn’t know who he was. They quickly told me that Mel Belli was a famous trial lawyer, that *Life* magazine had dubbed him “The King of Torts,” and that he had represented

the man who killed Lee Harvey Oswald. “Go out with the guy,” they said. “You’ll have a ball.”

Dating Mel was an exciting, crazy experience. I had never met anyone remotely like him. A month after we met, Mel accompanied me to New York, where I was to meet with my editor. At the publisher’s, Mel hijacked a desk, a telephone, and two secretaries to help him with a legal matter.

Mel’s boundless energy was matched by a penchant for illegal misbehavior. On that trip to New York, he put Plaza Hotel room-service silverware into his suitcase. Then he had the bellman stow it in our taxi. When I protested, Mel had a lawyer’s answer:

“I’m innocent. The bellman was the one who put the suitcase in the cab, I didn’t.”

Mel had such a collection of pilfered items that I once gave a dinner party for 50 using the china and silver he had stolen. Jaipur’s Rambagh Palace, London’s Savoy, Chicago’s Playboy Mansion, and dozens of other hotels were represented, as well as Motel 6, with a few metal ashtrays.

In San Francisco, we were photographed at opera openings, film festivals, wherever we went. Mel dearly loved publicity and made sure that our entrances and exits were timed to elicit the most coverage.

Still, Mel was a scoundrel and a heavy drinker, and I soon realized that although I thought I was in love with him, I had to end our relationship. “You drink too much,” I said. “It can only lead to trouble.” So, Mel asked me to have a farewell drink at his historic Montgomery Street office. It was evening; the interior garden was softly lit, and a fountain splashed. Mel greeted me with a flute of Perrier

Jouët and immediately embarked on an extravagant toast: “French bubbly for the woman I love, the beautiful girl who inspires me to ever greater acts of daring.” He drained his glass in one sustained gulp, and then he dropped to one knee and proposed. “Marry me, baby,” he beseeched. “If you do, I’ll never touch alcohol again, and I’ll prove it.” He leapt to his feet and threw open the doors to his liquor cabinet. In a spray of broken glass and booze, he sent bottle after bottle crashing across the courtyard.

Hands on hips, a bad-boy smile playing across his handsome face, he said, “I’m general counsel for Japan Airlines, baby, and I’m going to Tokyo in three days. Come with me. We can be married in a Shinto ceremony there.”

Against my better judgment, I said yes. We flew to Hokkaido, Japan, where the sacrament was to be performed. Driving from the airport, I was calmed

by the tranquility of the countryside. Mel, however, was far from calm. “Did you see that caged bear back there?” he said. “That’s cruel and unusual punishment. I’m going to liberate that animal!”

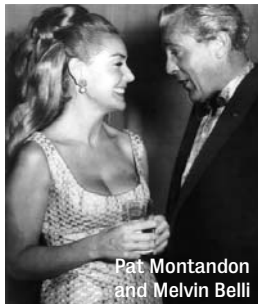
Addressing the hapless Japanese lawyer accompanying us, he ordered, “Buy that goddamn bear and see that it’s sent to San Francisco.” The man scurried off to do Mel’s bidding. Putting his arms around me, nuzzling, Mel laughed. “Baby, that goddamn bear is your wedding present. I hope you know how to cook it.”

In the wedding pavilion, we sat on big, white cushions, as Shinto priests, wearing stiff white robes and black-lacquered headdresses, waved tassels over our heads.

Mel’s vow to stop drinking ended with “I do.” Our honeymoon was a booze-filled nightmare. I had made a huge mistake. “I can’t be married to you, Mel,” I said. “Please, let’s end this with whatever dignity we can summon.” He ignored me. My attorney said we weren’t legally married because we hadn’t signed certain papers in Japan. Back home, I remember the messages Mel sent through the press: Pat has gotten lousy advice. Most lawyers couldn’t attest to the validity of a dog license. We’ll be remarried, anywhere she says.

Eventually, our 29-day “marriage” was legally set aside.

Mel’s death in 1996 and his bankruptcy created a litigation saga that included five of his law partners, two of his children, and three of his previous wives. Thank God I wasn’t one of them. **CL**



Pat Montandon and Melvin Belli

Pat Montandon’s (otohia@aol.com) memoir, *Oh the Hell of It All*, will be published in April by HarperCollins.