



**CHAPTER
SAMPLER**

BAD CITY

PERIL AND POWER

IN THE CITY OF ANGELS

PAUL PRINGLE

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

For fans of *Spotlight* and *Catch and Kill* comes a nonfiction thriller about corruption and betrayal radiating across Los Angeles from one of the region's most powerful institutions, a riveting tale from a Pulitzer-prize winning journalist who investigated the shocking events and helped bring justice in the face of formidable odds.

On a cool, overcast afternoon in April 2016, a salacious tip arrived at the *L.A. Times* that reporter Paul Pringle thought should have taken, at most, a few weeks to check out: a drug overdose at a fancy hotel involving one of the University of Southern California's shiniest stars—Dr. Carmen Puliafito, the head of the prestigious medical school. Pringle, who'd long done battle with USC and its almost impenetrable culture of silence, knew reporting the story wouldn't be a walk in the park. USC is one of the biggest employers in L.A., and it casts a long shadow.

But what he couldn't have foreseen was that this tip would lead to the unveiling of not one major scandal at USC but two, wrapped in a web of crimes and cover-ups. The rot rooted out by Pringle and his colleagues at *The Times* would creep closer to home than they could have imagined—spilling into their own newsroom.

Packed with details never before disclosed, Pringle goes behind the scenes to reveal how he and his fellow reporters triumphed over the city's debased institutions, in a narrative that reads like L.A. noir. This is L.A. at its darkest and investigative journalism at its brightest.

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**Paul Pringle** is a *Los Angeles Times* reporter who specializes in investigating corruption. In 2019, he and two colleagues won the Pulitzer Prize in Investigative Reporting for their work uncovering the widespread sexual abuse by Dr. George Tyndall at the University of Southern California, an inquiry that grew out of their reporting the year before on Dr. Carmen Puliafito, dean of USC's medical school. Pringle was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2009 and a member of reporting teams that won Pulitzer Prizes in 2004 and 2011. Pringle won the George Polk Award in 2008, the same year the Society of Professional Journalists of Greater Los Angeles honored him as a distinguished journalist. Along with several colleagues, he shared in Harvard University's 2011 Worth Bingham Prize for Investigative Reporting. Pringle and a *Times* colleague won the California Newspaper Publishers Association's Freedom of Information Award in 2014 and the University of Florida's Joseph L. Brechner Freedom of Information Award in 2015. Pringle lives in Glendale, California.

## Bad City

**UNCORRECTED MATERIAL - NOT FOR SALE**

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# **BAD CITY**

**PERIL AND POWER  
IN THE CITY OF ANGELS**

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**PAUL PRINGLE**



**CELADON  
BOOKS**  

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**NEW YORK**



# PROLOGUE

**T**he tip about the dean of the University of Southern California's medical school hinted at something so salacious, so depraved, so outrageous, that it seemed too good to be true. Or too awful, if you weren't a journalist.

It came to the *Los Angeles Times* through a staff photographer, Ricardo DeAratanha. He got the tip at a house party, purely by chance, and emailed it the next day to a colleague. DeAratanha wrote, "I came across someone last night, who witnessed an apparent coverup involving the Dean of the School of Medicine at USC. It involved lots of drugs and a half dressed unconscious young girl, in the dean's hotel room." He went on to say that the tipster would have more details.

The day after that, another colleague forwarded Ricardo's email to me, writing, "Ricardo has been trying to find someone to drop this tip on. Everybody's been a little skittish about it. I told him you're the one who would know how to handle it."

More often than not, the most tantalizing tips become a fool's errand, a fruitless prospecting for truth from rumors and exaggerations and outright fabrications. Sometimes they are anonymous,

sometimes not. The anonymous ones might arrive from an encrypted email account or a hand-scrawled letter with no return address. A large number of these tips, dispiritingly so, are about racist cops and thieving politicians and sexually abusive bosses. Others are meant to exact revenge against business partners in ventures gone south. Unfaithful spouses, especially if they're famous, are a favorite target. So are the lawyers and judges who handled the resulting divorces. It gets even worse when the custody of children is in play.

And yet no matter how colorful they are in the details, no matter how important the story they promise to tell might be, the tips that are particularly over-the-top usually lead nowhere.

But not this one.

This tip was about Dr. Carmen Puliafito, a Harvard-trained eye surgeon, inventor, and big-dollar rainmaker who straddled the highest reaches of the medical world and academia. He was a wizard in the operating room and an innovator in the laboratory. Puliafito estimated that he raised \$1 billion for USC. He brought a brainy refinement to the charity circuit of Hollywood and Beverly Hills, mixing as easily with designer-dressed movie stars as he did with the residents in lab coats at the Keck School of Medicine. But as luridly improbable as it seemed at first, the tip about Puliafito not only was on the mark, it merely scratched the surface. And what was revealed beneath that surface was a deep vein of corruption and betrayal that webbed through the Los Angeles establishment and corroded some of the city's most essential institutions, my own newspaper included.

The scandals that followed led to the downfall of powerful men. But it was a close call, a near miss, and many innocent and vulnerable people were hurt along the way. As of this writing, not all of them had gotten the justice they deserved.

# 1

## THE OVERDOSE

**A** fog scented by canyon pines greeted Devon Khan when he stepped from his front door. It was early in the morning of March 4, 2016, the day of the overdose, and Khan was on his way to work. The low sun lighting the ridges of the San Gabriels promised there would be no rain. The mountains provided a painterly backdrop to the north side of Pasadena, where Khan lived with his wife and their ten-year-old daughter. He was forty-four years old and the reservations supervisor at the Hotel Constance, a boutique inn on the edge of Pasadena's central business district. A veteran of the hotel industry, Khan had bounced from property to property as better opportunities presented themselves. He had worked at the old Ritz-Carlton in Pasadena and its successor, the Langham Huntington. Khan did stints at the Mondrian and Sunset Tower, the West Hollywood haunts of the wealthy and celebrated. Hospitality at this level was a demanding and humbling gig. The default expectation was that every need, wish, whim, and mood of the guests will be catered to, and must be abided with a smile. Even for the guests who were out of line, deference and discretion remained the watchwords. Khan understood that. Polite, soft-spoken, eager

to please, and handsome, with a striking resemblance to Los Angeles Laker Rick Fox, he considered himself an excellent fit for the business.

But only to a point. There were limits to what Khan would tolerate to keep his job.

On this Friday morning, he drove the usual way to the Constance, a two-mile jaunt past the palms and tall conifers on Hill Avenue. The avenue ran surveyor-straight from the more affordable neighborhoods on the north end, with their auto body shops and nail salons, south toward the domains of high-walled estates with lawns as broad as meadows. Pasadena was an old-money enclave of L.A. The fortunes that had built it came from the early railroads and banks and land developments, not the movie riches that greened Beverly Hills. Halfway along the drive on Hill Avenue sat the 110-year-old clapboard house where Khan and his late mother had lived for a while, when the structure was a women's shelter. Khan was a middle schooler at the time, and his mother was a crack cocaine addict. One of her principal dealers was her father. Khan's grandfather was a charmer who drove a Cadillac convertible and took a special liking to him, a sentiment Khan could never return.

The family was from Kentucky, by way of Ohio and Michigan, and Khan's mother had moved with him and his older brother to L.A. in hopes of a fresh start. Their fathers were no longer around. Khan's father was a businessman, model, and songwriter. One day in Detroit, as he walked out of a pharmacy, he was shot in the stomach on the orders of a man whose housing fraud scheme he threatened to expose. The bullet nearly killed him, and he later became schizophrenic, which confined him to a mental institution for the rest of his days. Khan's mother had left him long before the shooting. She was loving and engaging and smart, and had studied social work at the University of Louisville. But drugs were her undoing, and L.A. did not change that. Seeing the house on Hill Avenue always reminded Khan of how far he had come in life—from

the bouts of homelessness, the weeks spent sleeping on the couches of people he barely knew, the long periods of living with his mother's friends while she did another stretch in jail, and the lonely hospitalizations that came with his battle against sickle cell anemia. Khan had navigated and survived it all, and he would marvel to himself that he was a Pasadena homeowner. Four years ago, he and his German-born wife, Tanja—they had met when she was a flight attendant for Lufthansa—bought the house on Wesley Avenue, a tidy white bungalow boutonniere with a robust growth of bougainvillea. Tanja and their daughter loved Pasadena as much as he did.

Devon Khan was a family man who had put down roots, and he was always mindful of how much he had and how much he had to lose.

A few minutes after 7:00 A.M., he parked across the street from the Hotel Constance. With its butter-smooth arches and cast-stone friezes, the seven-story Constance was a 1926 showpiece of Mediterranean Revival architecture that fronted a corner of Colorado Boulevard, the route of the Rose Parade. Khan was the first of the Constance morning shift to arrive, as he usually was. He liked to get a jump on the overnight reservations, many of which came from the eastern time zones. Khan spent most of the hours in his office off the lobby, making sure the online reservations were processed, fielding questions about rates—the routine tasks. Around 4:00 P.M., he was preparing to head home when he got the MOD—manager on duty—call from the front desk.

Khan was the highest-ranking employee on the premises; the other managers were in a meeting at the hotel corporate offices across the street. He was annoyed that he had to handle the call, in part because he had been denied a promotion to front office manager, the person who normally would deal with whatever headache the call signaled. Khan believed he was more than qualified for the position. He had to wonder if he was passed over because he

sometimes questioned the actions of the guests or his superiors. That's who he was. One time, at a different property, a Russian businessman who was a frequent guest blew up at one of Khan's colleagues when she asked him for an ID card required for entry to the hotel's membership-only spa. Khan came to his coworker's defense, telling the Russian that was no way to speak to people. The Russian complained, and Khan got written up. At another hotel, a manager instructed Khan to downgrade a guest's suite reservation to make the premium room available for a legendary actress who arrived without a booking. The guest is a nobody—stick him in a regular room, the manager said. Khan made his displeasure known, which was not appreciated. On one occasion, he had to consider if his being Black was a factor, if a white executive viewed him as, well, *uppity*.

He walked to the front desk to inquire about the MOD call. "What's the issue?"

A clerk told him that the guest in 304 wanted to stay another night and specifically in that room. The guest sounded "jittery." The problem was that 304 had already been reserved by another party who was due to check in at any time. And the room was prized for its balcony. Before Khan could suggest a solution, the desk phone rang. It was the housekeeping supervisor; she needed a manager on the third floor right away.

*Okay*, Khan thought, *the guest probably wants to make a complaint*.

He quickly checked the computer for 304. The room was registered to a Carmen Puliafito. Khan didn't recognize the name. Puliafito—was Carmen a man or a woman?—wasn't listed as a repeat patron or VIP. Khan took the elevator to the third floor. As he stepped out, the housekeeping supervisor and the hotel security guard were waiting for him in the hallway. Beyond them, outside 304, a bellman waited with a cart piled with luggage and unpacked clothing. Khan was confused. *Why is the guest demanding to extend his stay in the room*

*if all of his luggage is on the cart? He must have agreed to move to another room.*

Then the housekeeping supervisor told Khan there was an unconscious woman in 304.

“Unconscious?”

She nodded and looked toward the closed door of the room with concern.

“I’ll get my eyes on her,” Khan said.

It was hotel protocol that Khan could not simply walk into the room. He knocked. An older man with a wan, off-center face opened the door halfway and asked if Khan had the key to his new room. The man appeared to be in his sixties and was dressed in rumpled jeans and a stretched-out polo shirt. He had dimmed, spidery eyes, and his thinning hair went in several different directions. Clearly, he’d had a rough night and a rough day that followed. Khan knew all the tells: drugs and alcohol. The only question was how much had been consumed in 304, particularly by the woman. He couldn’t see her from the doorway. Khan decided that the quickest and least confrontational way to check on her was to remain courteous and help the man move her and their belongings to the second room. He told him he would be right back with the key. Looking relieved, the man thanked him and closed the door.

And that’s when Khan got the rest of the story from the housekeeping supervisor and security guard. They said that the day before, when the man and woman were out, a housekeeper had found drugs scattered around the room. The security staff was alerted and took photographs of the drugs. What type of drugs they were wasn’t apparent. Management did not ask the man and woman to check out. When it came to drinking and drugging, the policy of the Constance and most other hotels was to live and let live, unless the staff witnessed laws being broken or someone getting hurt. Prudishness was bad for the partying side of the business. And no one

had actually seen the occupants of 304 take drugs. The photos were a precautionary measure, in case the guests did get out of hand in a way management couldn't ignore or if there were legal issues down the road.

There was more from the supervisor and security guard—all of it news to Khan, because none of it had to do with reservations. At the man's request, the bellman had already brought a wheelchair to 304 to move the woman. They said she was in the chair at that moment, out cold.

Khan hurried down to the lobby to get the key to a new room—312 was available. When Khan returned, the man let him into 304, resigned that he could no longer keep him out. Khan stepped into the room and drew himself up at what he saw. The woman, blond and very young, looked as if she had been plopped into the wheelchair like a sack of feed. Her head rested heavily on her shoulder, her gossamer hair matted on her brow. She wore only a white hotel robe and pink panties. Her limbs hung straight down, as if they were weighted; one leg dangled off the chair where a footrest was missing. Khan could not be sure she was breathing.

“Ma’am?” he said. “Ma’am? Ma’am?” Nothing.

Khan took in the room, which was 1920s small, updated in a swirly modern decor, and with the balcony that offered a view of the boulevard. Strewn over the carpet were empty beer bottles, a plastic bag of whip-it cartridges—the small canisters of nitrous oxide inhaled for an illicit high—a half-inflated balloon used to enhance that high, and a palm-size container for a butane torch, the type favored for a meth pipe. Burn marks scarred the bed. The room had a sweet-and-sour odor of sweat.

“Ma’am?” Not a sound.

It didn't take a medical degree to conclude she had overdosed.  
*Drug debris everywhere.*

The man was silent. He was old enough to be the woman's father or even her grandfather.



Khan noticed a small camera tripod sitting on top of the television. *What kind of degenerate is this guy?*

“Are you okay, ma’am?”

There wasn’t the slightest flutter along the alabaster face, although Khan could see she was breathing, if only faintly. He decided to move her and the man to 312—and leave 304 in just the state it was in for the police. He asked the man to lift her leg where the footrest used to be so it wouldn’t drag on the floor. Khan guided the chair out of the room and into the hallway, the man awkwardly keeping up with the woman’s calf in his hand. *If we were down in the parking lot wheeling away a woman like this, people would think we were carting off a murder victim.*

“Can you hear me, ma’am?” Khan said as they rolled through the hallway. Even the one-legged ride didn’t stir her.

Before he gave the man the new key, he asked for an ID. The man produced his driver’s license: Carmen Puliafito. So the room was registered to him, not the woman. Once they were inside 312, Khan told Puliafito he would call 911. Puliafito looked stricken, as if this was just the beginning of the day’s troubles.

“That’s not necessary,” Puliafito said. “She just had too much to drink.” He paused. “Listen, I’m a doctor.”

*A doctor? Bullshit. A doctor would have called the paramedics himself. This squeezed-out old man was just another john, a fool with enough cash for an afternoon rollick at the Constance. Now he was panicked about getting busted—and a scumbag for trying to deny the girl help. She could be Khan’s daughter. She certainly was somebody’s daughter.*

“I’m caring for her,” Puliafito said.

Khan knew he had to choose his words carefully. He said, “I would be derelict in my responsibilities if I didn’t seek medical attention for her.”

With that, Khan walked out of the room and returned to his office to call 911. A woman dispatcher answered.

"Firefighter paramedics."

"Hi. I'm calling from the Hotel Constance in Pasadena."

Khan gave her the address and said a woman needed help.

"She's up in her room, passed out, unresponsive."

"Is she breathing?"

"Yes."

The dispatcher asked him to transfer the call to the room, and he did so.

Khan had no way of knowing if Puliafito answered—or if anyone answered—when the call was transferred.

"Hello?" Puliafito said.

"Hi, this is the fire department. Did you call for 911?"

"Uh," Puliafito said, "not me, basically." He was rattled. "Um, I had, ah, my girlfriend here had a bunch of drinks, and, uh, she's breathing . . ."

"Is she breathing right now?"

"Yes, she's absolutely breathing." Now Puliafito's voice was edged with annoyance. "Absolutely breathing."

"Is she vomiting at all?"

"No, she's sitting up in bed, she's passed out. I mean, I'm a doctor, actually, so . . ."

"Okay, all right."

"She's sitting up in bed with normal respirations, I mean . . ."

"You have her sitting up?"

"Well, she's sitting up now, yeah." More annoyance.

"Is she awake now?"

"No, she's sort of, very groggy, you know. So . . ."

"Okay, just make sure she doesn't fall over. We're going to be there shortly to check her out, okay?"

"Okay, fine, fine, fine. Thank you." He sounded like he couldn't wait to get off the line.

"Do you know how much she drank?"

“You know, a bunch. I mean, I came in the room, and there were lots of, uh, you know, cans of . . .”

“Okay, but did she take anything else with it or just the alcohol?”

“I think just the alcohol.”

“All right, we’re going to be there shortly, sir.”

And they were. Khan heard the sirens approach as he phoned the offices across the street in search of a manager; a higher-up needed to be there to deal with the authorities. The HR director picked up and said she’d be right over. The sirens got louder and louder and then went silent. A fire engine and a paramedic wagon had pulled up to the curb on the lobby side of the hotel. Two firefighter paramedics walked into the lobby with a gurney in tow, the rumbling noises of the boulevard following them through the door. Right behind them was an older firefighter, a tall man with graying hair. As Khan directed them to the elevator, the older firefighter began asking questions.

“Do you know what kind of drugs are involved?”

“Let’s go to the room,” Khan said, by way of an answer.

On the third floor, the two paramedics headed to 312 with the gurney while Khan led the older firefighter into 304. The firefighter got an eyeful of the paraphernalia on the floor and the scorched bed. The security guard had opened the guest safe and, sure enough, inside was a small plastic bag of white powder. Khan had seen enough of the powder around his mom to recognize it as crystal meth.

“Don’t let anyone in here until the police get here,” the firefighter said. “Leave this room exactly how it is.” He left to join the paramedics.

The police still had not arrived, so another staffer made a second 911 call to make sure they were on their way. By that time, the hotel general manager had returned from the corporate offices. Khan briefed him as they stood looking at the mess in 304. In the hallway, the paramedics had the woman on the gurney and were loading her

into the service elevator. In attempts to rouse her, they called out, “Sarah? Sarah? Can you hear us, Sarah?”

*Sarah.*

A chill came over Khan. His daughter’s name was Sarah. It drove home that he was a witness to a father’s nightmare—someone’s daughter strapped to a gurney, unconscious, looking as if she may never wake up. Helpless, voiceless, her life in the hands of strangers. Khan again thought of the man’s attempts to stop him from calling the paramedics. And he thought of the tripod on the TV. He figured the man—this Puliafito—used it to film on his phone whatever was happening in the room that led to the overdose.

“When the police get here, you should tell them to get the guy’s phone,” Khan said to the general manager. “I’m sure there’s some nasty stuff on there.”

There was nothing left for Khan to do. Five minutes later, he was driving home. He didn’t wait to see what he assumed would be the cops hooking the man in handcuffs and hauling him away.

Khan spent much of that weekend driving for Uber. The money in the hotel trade wasn’t what it should be, and the Khans had a mortgage to pay and Sarah’s college education to save for. Tanja contributed with her shifts as a server at a popular Mexican restaurant in Santa Monica. They juggled their work schedules—“like ships passing in the night,” Khan would say—to make sure one of them was always home for their daughter.

When he told Tanja about the overdose and his decision to alert the authorities, she immediately became concerned. He knew she would. His wife was a worrier.

“You called the police?” Tanja said to him. She feared the older man might be in a position to hurt her husband. People with money stayed at the Constance. “Who knows who those people are?”

Khan assured her it would be fine.

There was nothing on the local news websites about the overdose

or an arrest. Khan wasn't surprised. Routine drug busts didn't necessarily make the news. He wanted to believe the young woman had survived. But how could he be certain? Fatal overdoses also didn't make the news, unless the dead person was famous.

The following Monday, Khan reported to work at his usual time, the morning sun barely over the mountains. He bumped into a colleague who was getting coffee in a service kitchen near the hotel's front entrance; the small space smelled of toasted bagels. The colleague had been on duty after Khan left Friday. Khan asked him if the police arrested the man involved in the overdose. The question was more of a conversation starter than a genuine query, since an arrest had seemed guaranteed.

"No," the coworker said. He shook his head. "Nothing happened."

Khan was taken aback. "What do you mean, nothing?"

"It's like, when the police got here, they already knew who the guy was. They didn't arrest him; they didn't do anything. They said something like, 'Drug abuse isn't a crime, it's a disease.'"

That made no sense. "Didn't they get his phone?"

"They didn't take his phone." He shrugged as if to say it couldn't be explained. "Oh, and the guy really is a doctor."

Khan still didn't buy that. "No way."

"Yeah, and he isn't just *any* doctor—he's the dean of medicine at USC."

"*What?*"

"He's the dean, yeah. At USC."

Khan stared at him. It took only a moment for disbelief to turn to outrage and then to disgust. And Khan knew that he would do something about it. He had to. It was his code.

## SARAH AND TONY

**T**wo months earlier, on a January night, Dr. Carmen Puliafito was behind the wheel of his Porsche, tooling up Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu. PCH could be a crawl during commute times, but the traffic sailed at this hour. Below the road, moonlight silkened the dark surf break, the crashing waves soundless at this distance. Puliafito turned onto Trancas Canyon, driving north into the steep and striated bluffs of the Santa Monica Mountains. This was one of the most expensive zip codes in the world, even though the residents had to cope with wildfires in the dry months and mudslides when the rains came. Puliafito was headed to Creative Care, one of many addiction treatment centers that had set up shop in Malibu. The location went to their marketing strategy; these were luxury rehabs, the five-star retreat version of halfway houses. They pillowed the prohibition on drugs and drink with ocean views, gourmet chefs, and masseuses. The frills came at a price. Places like Creative Care charged upward of \$30,000 a month, and often more. They drew clients like Charlie Sheen, Lindsay Lohan, and Robert Downey Jr., which was another selling point for addicts who lacked fame but not money.

Puliafito had plenty of money. He made more than \$1 million a year at USC, and he and his wife owned a Pasadena home valued in the vicinity of \$6 million. And during the short time he had known Sarah Warren, who was not his wife, he had spent lavishly on her—hundreds of thousands of dollars. He was paying all her living expenses, starting with the rent on one apartment after another, in Pasadena and then Huntington Beach. Puliafito covered her car payments, her community college fees, even her cable TV bills. He paid for her furniture, clothing, makeup, and dental work. The spending money he gave her set him back as much as \$1,000 a week. And there were the trips to New York, Miami, and Boston, even Switzerland. In New York, they stayed at the Plaza—in the same suite that someone said Leonardo DiCaprio favored. Puliafito treated her to a shopping binge at Bergdorf Goodman on Fifth Avenue. It cost him a grand just for a pair of earrings and a necklace.

The expenses meant nothing to Puliafito. Sarah had become the singular focus of his life, his obsession. Sarah called him Tony, after his middle name, Anthony. Sometimes she even called him honey—honey! He told her he loved her.

More important than love was his need to control her. Sarah knew that was the foundation of their relationship. The minute she slipped out of his grip, the minute she really got clean, it would be over—he would mean nothing to her. Puliafito could not let that happen. Which was why he was making the hour-long drive to Malibu, nosing the Porsche up the narrow curves of the canyon. Sarah had checked in to Creative Care that very day. Her parents persuaded her to do it. This was her second stay at the place. She walked out two weeks into her first, some months ago; it had just been too hard to give up the drugs. It wasn't looking good this time around, either, because Puliafito called her on the house phone—cell phones were confiscated at check-in—to say she had left her illicit stash of Xanax in his car. Sarah had no prescription for Xanax, and she could never get one in rehab, but Puliafito kept her supplied. When she

took enough Xanax—several times the normal dosage of the benzo, which could be highly addictive in such amounts—it took the edge off her cravings for meth and heroin. She told Puliafito on the phone to bring the drugs up. And the dean of the Keck School of Medicine was doing just that. He was delivering drugs to a young addict in rehab. He was breaking the law and shattering every ethical standard of his profession—of any profession devoted to human wellness. Puliafito was providing her with drugs because they maintained his hold on her. She was helpless—young and desperate and helpless.

Puliafito pulled off Trancas and into the parking area of the Creative Care compound, whose seven buildings were clustered along the hillsides. Smuggling in the Xanax wouldn't be easy. Staffers at the center knew Puliafito from his visits during Sarah's previous stay. They remembered him well—the brusque and meddling doctor who threw his credentials around and barked at them that Sarah needed this or required that. They remembered that the relationship between Sarah and him, supposedly a professional one, did not seem right. And they knew his Porsche.

Even before he encountered Sarah, Puliafito had become bored with the straitlaced life of a dean, a physician, a husband, and a father. It didn't matter that he held one of the loftiest positions in his profession or that he had worked hard to build a sterling reputation—or that he had grown rich. Puliafito was an Italian kid from the suburbs of Buffalo, the son of an electrical engineer father and a homemaker mother. He was exceptionally smart and ambitious and was admitted to Harvard College and then Harvard Medical School. Puliafito graduated magna cum laude in earning his medical degree, and he put in the extra years to become an ophthalmologist. And it wasn't long after he finished his studies that his brilliance as a clinician and surgeon became known in the discipline. Puliafito co-invented optical coherence tomography, a breakthrough technology that employed light waves to take images of the retina to help diagnose and treat diseases of the eye. Art restorers also used it to image



the layers of a painting. Puliafito knew eyeballs the way the impressionists knew color. He wasn't your average contact lens prescriber.

The medical side of academia had taken notice early. Puliafito founded the Laser Research Laboratory at Harvard's Massachusetts Eye and Ear infirmary. Then the teaching hospital of the Tufts University School of Medicine brought Puliafito on board. There, he launched the New England Eye Center. His next stop was the University of Miami, where he led the medical school's eye institute and oversaw its return to the number one position in the all-important rankings by *U.S. News & World Report* magazine, the annual beauty contest of American universities and their professional schools. The rankings were seen as an instrument to accelerate fundraising and help schools recruit from among the aristocracy of professor-researchers who were magnets for seven-figure research grants. A high placement by *U.S. News* made alums proud of their school, and proud alums tended to donate more generously, which provided cash for big-name hires in the money-generating research fields. During Puliafito's term at Miami, research funding for the school tripled.

Puliafito knew more about money than how to spend it. As if his education credentials weren't stellar enough, he added a master's degree from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania.

In August 2007, the provost of the University of Southern California sold Puliafito on heading its medical school. The provost was C. L. Max Nikias, a man with a boxy smile who spoke with the vaguely Spanish-sounding accent of his native Cyprus. Nikias was smitten with Puliafito's achievements at Miami, particularly his success in landing those research grants. That sort of performance was just what USC's Keck School of Medicine needed. Keck was in a long and unending competition with the medical school of the crosstown University of California, Los Angeles, which was more accomplished and more prestigious. The competition was for the best students, the fattest grants, and, in the end, the *name*. Which meant *status*, which came from a better showing in the *U.S. News* rankings. It did not

mean much to campus presidents and fundraising directors that news organizations and others had taken the rankings apart and found them to be lacking (and even corruptible) as real measures of a university's excellence. The rankings had become a brand, a seal of approval, a hallmark of which schools to attend and which schools were most worthy of donations to their endowments.

Puliafito accepted Nikias's offer. Miami had been rewarding, but he couldn't resist the prospect of heading the medical school at the largest private university in the West. The day USC hired Puliafito, the university issued a news release. "I am honored to be part of the leadership team at the Keck School and at the University of Southern California," Puliafito said in the release. "The Keck School is poised to become a leader in American medicine."

The release included this statement from Nikias: "We believe this appointment heralds a moment of transformation for the Keck School."

Puliafito and his wife, Janet Pine, a psychiatrist, made the move to L.A. with their three children. Puliafito and Pine were schoolmates at Harvard. The couple became a USC package; the university hired Pine as an associate professor of psychiatry. They bought one of Pasadena's signature homes, a century-old Tudor revival mansion whose eleven thousand square feet presided over more than an acre and a half of rolling lawn and mature trees along a graceful curve of South Los Robles Avenue. It was designed by the acclaimed architectural firm of Hudson and Munsell, whose works included the domed and pillared Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County in Exposition Park, just across the way from USC.

The deanship was high pressure. When Puliafito took the job, *U.S. News* ranked Keck *twenty-five* spots below UCLA's medical school, a daunting gap, maybe an unbridgeable one. But Puliafito plugged away. Keck was a staid and entrenched institution—the school dated to 1885—and he shook it up. He wasn't always gentle about it. Some of the department chairs and faculty members, especially

the longer-tenured ones, complained about his abrasiveness, his disdain for collegiality. But no one in the offices of the provost or the president seemed to care. What mattered to them was that Puliafito had lured more than seventy professors to Keck, including researchers who brought those bundles of grant money with them. He even managed to poach a University of California, San Diego, professor and his lab, which was an international leader in the search for an Alzheimer's cure. The lab was conducting drug trials around the world and expected to receive hundreds of millions of dollars in funding as its work blossomed. That was game-changing money, and it was just one lab.

Puliafito had been dean for a little over eight years and, by his count, had secured \$1 billion in new funding for the school. He promoted Keck and USC as a featured speaker at national conventions and training seminars. And when he wasn't talking jargon to a ballroom of physicians and researchers, he was representing USC at gala fundraisers, grinning in publicity photos with Hollywood luminaries like Warren Beatty and Jay Leno and chatting with business titans such as Larry Ellison. That was the fun part of the job, yes, but Puliafito also kept up with the less glamorous demands of a professional of his stature. He had coauthored dozens of articles in leading medical journals. He held a seat on the governing board of the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine, which funds billions of dollars in research into stem cell treatments for diseases that had no cure.

And yet none of it was enough for Puliafito. That extended to his pastime, which was stamp collecting. He picked it up in childhood, and the hobby had long relaxed him and helped him to stay centered. Always the overachiever, Puliafito was an award-winning philatelist, and his collections were said to be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. An upcoming auction offered the "Dr. Carmen A. Puliafito Collection of United States Independent Mails," which consisted of nineteenth-century stamps that private firms issued separately from

the government postal service. Fellow philatelists praised the collection, declaring it one of the finest of its kind.

But it was *stamps*. Puliafito needed something more than that. He was tumbling headlong into his midsixties, well into old-man territory. He and his wife were in their fourth decade of marriage. Their children were grown. His job and all the perks that came with it had become less and less important to him. He needed something more engaging. Something thrilling, risky, even dangerous—something *life-affirming*.

Sarah was that something.

Puliafito parked the Porsche and climbed out with the ziplock bag of fifty or so Xanax. He walked in the cool gloom toward the building where Sarah was trying to kick.

## THE TIP

**D**evon Khan couldn't let it go.

More to the point, he *wouldn't* let it go. He could drop it if he wanted to—forget about it, keep his mouth shut, walk away. And that would be a relief to his wife. Tanja had every reason to be anxious. Puliafito obviously had the wherewithal to beat an arrest in the face of overwhelming evidence of multiple crimes—*the hotel room was a yard sale of drugs and paraphernalia*—and that meant he should be feared. On Khan's short acquaintance, Carmen A. Puliafito was dissipated and desperate, a fool of an old man, a creep hollowed out by his baser weaknesses. But he was also the big-deal medical school dean whose name and face were all over Google, without a blemish. He was an important person doing important work for an important university. Puliafito was a Harvard man, he was rich, and he was *white*. Khan was none of those things. His degree was an associate of arts from Riverside City College. If Khan spoke out about what he knew about the overdose, Puliafito would have more than one way to crush him.

But it ate at him. Again and again, Khan thought about what should have happened to Puliafito and did not. He could not stop

thinking about the young woman, the other Sarah, and how Puliafito tried to stop him from getting her help. A *doctor*. A so-called healer. It gnawed at Khan as he sat in his office, alone; on the other side of his closed door, the lobby of the Constance was quiet. It had been a full week since the cops let Puliafito go. Khan had considered that there could still be an arrest, perhaps after the police investigated further. But then he thought, no, if the cops didn't have enough to make a bust with what they found in 304, it was because they didn't want enough. They were committed to looking the other way.

What could Khan do about it? Sure, he could call the Pasadena Police Department and ask to speak to a supervisor, maybe even the chief, and demand to know why Puliafito was allowed to skate. But what would that accomplish? Confronting the cops would only piss them off. Would it be smart to get on the bad side of the Pasadena police? The department wasn't known for maintaining a good relationship with the Black residents of the city. There had been questionable police shootings of Black men. And last summer, they arrested an organizer for Black Lives Matter Pasadena and charged her with a felony under California's old lynching law (although the term had been removed from the statute earlier that year). The police claimed she tried to stop them from arresting another woman, which they said was a form of lynching. *Seriously, forget about getting into the face of the cops.*

So then . . . what? Who? Going to the media could be dicey because reporters would want to speak to him and probably use his name. And if Khan was publicly attached to any effort to expose the circumstances of the overdose, he could be fired for violating the cardinal rule of guest privacy. His future in the hotel business could vanish in an instant.

He stared at his computer screen. It was a little after ten thirty in the morning. *Puliafito cannot get away with it. The police cannot get away with it.* If Khan couldn't go to the cops, maybe he could reach out to city hall. And if he couldn't go to the media, maybe he could

bluff city hall on that score by claiming the press *was* looking into the overdose. Maybe that would get someone to act.

A lot of maybes.

Khan hunched over his keyboard and called up the city of Pasadena's website. He clicked through the department links until he settled on the page of city attorney Michele Beal Bagneris. The page had a portal that invited residents to submit comments on an email form.

*Perfect.*

But then Khan hesitated. He didn't trust anonymity on the Web, and he would never use his personal computer for something like this. Contacting the city from his work computer was safer, but he couldn't be sure how much safer; it wouldn't be surprising if an anonymous submission to the city attorney could be traced back to the computer on his desk and to his sign-on credentials. For all Khan knew, if an investigation he triggered led to him, the first to be informed of his involvement would be his bosses and the second would be Puliafito.

And the harm that Khan felt was lying in wait, the threat, was exactly what people like Puliafito counted on to silence people.

*Well, fuck them.*

Khan began typing. He identified himself on the email form only as *Concerned Citizen*. He wrote:

A story regarding the incident that occurred on March 4, 2016 involving Carmen A Puliafito, Dean of Keck School of Medicine, is forthcoming. I have close ties with Pasadena and would hate to see Pasadena PD portrayed in a bad light due to a possible cover up. Please look into this matter before it is too late.

He took a deep breath, and then he sent it.

There was no indication that the city attorney's office took any action in response to Khan's email. Not that Friday nor in the weeks that

followed. It was as if his message had vaporized somewhere between the Constance and city hall.

Khan had figured the email was an outside chance. He was realistic about the fact that the city attorney and her staff worked side by side with the police. The city attorney was more or less the police department's lawyer. Why would she complicate that relationship to go after a heavyweight like Puliafito? Khan hedged his bets. And he didn't wait weeks to do it. On the Monday after he sent the email, he decided to report what he knew about Puliafito to the president of USC—a man named C. L. Max Nikias. Khan could not be certain that this Nikias or the people around him were not already part of the cover-up. The only way to be sure was to drop the Puliafito matter right in the man's lap. He found the number to Nikias's office on the USC website. Khan knew that calling it, even from a blocked number, would again pose the risk that he could be discovered. If the cops wanted to find him, couldn't they unmask his blocked number through the carrier? He wasn't sure USC could do that without the police, but he had to assume it could. Either way, calling Nikias probably was no more perilous than contacting the city attorney.

He was at work when he made up his mind to place the call. It had to be done. Khan needed to be able to tell himself that he had tried everything that reasonably could be tried. Calling from the Constance was not a good idea, though—because if Nikias did speak to him, he could be on the phone for a while. Khan intended to provide plenty of details of what happened at the hotel. The longer he was on the call, the greater the chance one of his coworkers would interrupt him or even overhear him. When his lunch break rolled around, Khan tapped the number to Nikias's office into his phone without calling it and left the hotel. The day was windless and bright. He walked around the corner and headed south on Mentor Avenue, past the bistro that occupied a neon-ribboned deco building beyond the Constance garage, past the Normandy apartment house across the



street that was as old as the hotel. The apartments beyond Green Street were newer and boxy. As he crossed Green, Khan called the number.

A woman answered. She sounded young. Maybe a grad student assistant? Once Khan ascertained he had the president's office, he asked to speak to Nikias. The girlish voice wanted to know Khan's name and the reason for the call. He replied that he would not give his name, and then he began trotting out the information he had about the dean of the medical school. Khan spoke in the same calm and unhurried manner that he did to the 911 dispatcher ten days earlier. The woman politely broke in to ask if he could send his information to the office in writing.

"No, I'm not interested in doing that," Khan said.

The woman said she was transferring him. The line went silent for a few moments, and then a second woman came on and asked Khan how she might be able to help him. Like the first woman, she did not identify herself by name. Khan repeated his request to speak to Nikias. The woman said the president was not available and suggested she was as far as Khan would get.

The call was taking longer than Khan had thought. He had crossed Cordova and Del Mar, walking by the apartment buildings, and was nearing San Pasqual, where a canopy of oaks kept Mentor in shadow.

Khan laid it all out for the second woman: The dean of the medical school, Carmen Puliafito, was at the scene of an overdose on March 4 at the Hotel Constance in Pasadena. The victim was a young woman. There were drugs in the room. The police were called.

Khan could sense that the woman was taking notes. He kept talking.

The woman said he would have to put his complaint in writing for the school to proceed. *Complaint? Is that how his information was perceived?*

"I've done my part," Khan told her.

He then advised the woman that reporters were looking into the incident. Another bluff. She said nothing.

Khan thanked her and hung up.

“Are you sure nothing will happen to you?” Tanja Khan asked. “What about these people in power?”

She waited for Devon’s response, although she knew what it would be: *He would be fine, the family would be fine.* That’s what he said about making the 911 call, she thought, and then about the city attorney. But this time, he called the president of USC. If that got the dean in trouble, her husband could pay. Tanja’s mind raced. *Whatever people the dean knows, that ugly man, they would take revenge on Devon.* She remembered what happened after he stood up to the Russian businessman, the one with the foul mouth, another one with money. How could she forget? Because of the Russian, her husband eventually lost his job. And this dean and the president of USC were much bigger than the Russian.

“We’ll be fine,” Devon said now.

He had just arrived home from work, and Tanja was about to leave for her dinner shift at the restaurant. The bungalow was far from a palace, but it was the kind of house in the type of neighborhood they once thought they could never afford. And their daughter was thriving in school—so smart! Their life was good.

“Just be careful,” she told her husband.

The days fell away, and there was nothing about an investigation of Puliafito or an overdose at the Hotel Constance. Nothing about the police not doing their job. Nothing in the newspapers or on their websites. Nothing on television. Khan had brought his information to the two institutions responsible for making things right—the government and the university—and they ignored it. Buried it.

The cover-up seemed to be set in stone.

Khan would not have it. He was tormented. When he resolved

that there would be no investigation, he found himself willing to take one more chance. He made a final call, again after blocking his number—and this one was to the *L.A. Times*. No more bluffing about the media. He found the number for a tip line on the *Times* website, which was promoting the newspaper's upcoming Festival of Books at the USC campus, an annual event that was the largest of its kind in the nation. Khan took no notice of that and called the number. A switchboard operator answered. Khan told her that he needed to speak to a reporter about an important story—a local story. The operator patched the call through to a voice mail prompt.

Leaving a voice mail was out of the question. He could be identified by his voice. Khan ended the call.

It had been a month since the overdose. Khan had to accept that he had hit a wall. Maybe Tanja's bleak calculation had been correct all along: You could not go up against these people, not without suffering consequences. In Khan's case, the consequences might simply be the anger and frustration he couldn't shake, that low boil that came from knowing that the bad guys were getting away with it. He had been prepared to come forward if an investigation was launched. If his testimony was needed, he'd have taken the stand. But he refused to do the lone-wolf thing, to go public as the whistleblower. Since the day he made the 911 call, everything that had happened—and had *not* happened—confirmed his instincts that he and his family would be hurt if he took that path.

Khan stopped monitoring the news for any report on Puliafito. Time to move on.

Five days after the overdose, and forty-seven miles from Pasadena, the funeral motorcade of former first lady Nancy Reagan wound its way up Madera Road in Simi Valley. A public viewing of Mrs. Reagan was scheduled for that day at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum, where she would be interred alongside her husband. The library was shouldered into a sun-browned hillside above the road,

fronting a panorama of the Santa Susana Mountains, whose boulders and crags framed the filming locations of many Westerns. Veteran *L.A. Times* photographer Ricardo DeAratanha covered the motorcade. He pulled onto a side street and parked, downhill from the library, to transmit his photos from a laptop. He draped a tarp over the front of the car to block the sun so he could better see the images on the computer screen. That looked suspicious to someone in the neighborhood, and that person called the Simi Valley police. A motorcycle officer arrived quickly and then a patrol car. DeAratanha was startled when three officers confronted him. He identified himself as a *Times* photographer and showed the cops his media credentials, but that didn't satisfy them. DeAratanha suggested they were bracing him because he was nonwhite—a Brazilian.

Race was a touchy subject in Simi Valley, a predominantly white suburb where a jury acquitted four Los Angeles Police Department officers who were charged in the infamous Rodney King beating. The not-guilty verdicts sparked the 1992 L.A. rebellion. According to DeAratanha's attorney, the Simi Valley cops swarmed his sixty-five-year-old client, forced him to the ground, and handcuffed him. They arrested him on suspicion of resisting and obstructing a law enforcement officer.

DeAratanha was outraged then and even more so when prosecutors later decided to charge him with a misdemeanor based on his arrest. He assumed the case would be dropped. It wasn't as though he had been a threat to anyone. The day after he was charged, DeAratanha drove from his home in Agoura Hills across the San Fernando Valley to Pasadena, where his nephew was hosting a small party. It wasn't long before DeAratanha began venting at the gathering about his legal predicament, the photo assignment that ended with his arrest.

Khan was a guest at the party. DeAratanha's nephew lived two doors down from him and was a close friend of the family. They

vacationed together, and their daughters played together. Khan did not know DeAratanha, but he was sitting across the kitchen table from him when he told the story of his arrest. DeAratanha's main point was that he was just doing his job.

"Where do you work?" Khan asked him.

"The *L.A. Times*," DeAratanha said.

As he recalled later, Khan's "eyes became as big as moons." Here he was in the house of a buddy, someone he could trust, and his buddy's uncle happened to be someone who could help him finally get the word out about Puliafito and the cover-up.

"Man," he said to DeAratanha, "do I have a story for you."

DeAratanha listened closely, and I got Khan's tip two days later. The editors decided I should check it out because of my experience with USC investigations. Seven years earlier, my reporting disclosed that USC head football coach Pete Carroll, a revered figure on campus, violated NCAA rules by secretly retaining a former NFL coach to help run the Trojan kicking and punting squads, known as the special teams. The violation later became part of the NCAA's blistering sanctions of USC—among the harshest the association ever imposed on a school—that centered on unrelated allegations against Trojan running back Reggie Bush, who won the Heisman Trophy, and basketball star O. J. Mayo. And when the tip about the overdose arrived, my colleague Nathan Fenno and I were deep into an investigation of USC's most golden of golden boys, Pat Haden, then the university's athletic director.

Haden was the starting Trojan quarterback in 1973 and 1974 and went on to play the same position for the L.A. Rams—the rare athlete who reached that summit in college and professional sports in his hometown. After his days on the field, he became a fixture on national broadcasts of college and pro football, particularly for Notre Dame games. The clean-cut and studious Haden was more than an accomplished jock. He was a Rhodes Scholar, an attorney, and a

wealthy investment adviser. Fenno and I reported that Haden continued to hold lucrative positions on corporate boards while athletic director—moonlighting that was perfectly legal but perhaps a distraction from his USC duties. That wasn't nearly as bad as our finding that he had taken control of a scholarship charity for low-income students and then bled it to pay himself and his relatives more than \$2.4 million in fees for what nonprofit watchdogs said should have been volunteer work.

What could be worse than that for the USC leadership? I was about to find out.

I emailed DeAratanha for the name and phone number of the source he knew only as Devon. When I called, Khan immediately said he needed to be off the record. He explained that he would be fired if he were found to have released information about a hotel guest. I granted him anonymity; the potential loss of a job was among the circumstances under which the *Times* allows sources to go unnamed. Khan gave me his account of the overdose and the failure of the police to make an arrest. It was a shocking story—if it held up to scrutiny. Khan was precise in the details, including the times of day that events occurred. But a piece of information Khan did not have was the young woman's last name. He said he knew her first name only because he had overheard it. And he said he did not know if the woman named Sarah recovered from the overdose—if she lived.

"The fact that this guy's in charge of future doctors makes me sick," Khan said.

After twenty minutes or so, I thanked him and said I'd be back in touch. I then did a quick check of the *Times*'s electronic library and found that, eleven days earlier, the paper published a four-paragraph story reporting that Puliafito had "stepped down" as dean. Khan apparently had missed it. The story provided no reason for his resignation, which was strange. But Puliafito's abrupt departure from the deanship, in the middle of the school term, on a Thursday, suggested that Khan was telling the truth.

My sense then was that the overdose story would be scandalous but straightforward—that is, easy to report. I saw it as fundamentally a police story that wouldn't take much time to wrap up and get into the paper. A quick-and-dirty tale about another powerful man behaving in unspeakable ways.

That's what I'd thought. Until I visited the Pasadena Police Department.

## HITTING A WALL

**W**ith its gable stones and red brick and soaring windows, the Los Angeles County coroner's office looked more like a small Parisian opera house than a repository of cadaver slabs and coolers. The 1909 beaux arts building sat on the edge of the town-size USC Health Sciences campus in Boyle Heights, home to the Keck School of Medicine. Health Sciences was about seven miles from the university's main campus in South L.A. The coroner's office was the work of the same architects who designed Carmen Puliafito's mansion in Pasadena. It also was the first place to check on the well-being of the young woman who had been gurneyed out of his hotel room. Did "Sarah" die from the overdose? Given Khan's account, the possibility could not be dismissed; yes, the woman had been breathing, but she was chin-to-shoulder limp. If she didn't make it, the death became a coroner's case, and an autopsy would have been performed. And the questions for Puliafito, the Pasadena police, and USC would be more pointed.

It took me a few days to determine if anyone who matched Sarah's description had died of drug-related causes during a period of several weeks following the overdose. In my query to the coroner's



office, I extended the timeline of the possible death in case the woman had lingered before succumbing. The delay in the office's response was not unexpected. The office served a population of more than ten million people, the largest for any coroner in the nation, and it received about eighteen thousand death reports that year and performed thirty-three hundred autopsies. The office was perennially short on both money and the staff the dollars could hire. The dead didn't have much of a political lobby, so funding for more pathologists was not a high priority for the county board of supervisors.

As I waited to hear from the coroner, I began to scrub the *Times's* public records databases—LexisNexis, Accurant, and TLO—for anything on Puliafito. No criminal filings against him popped up. The only legal case that surfaced was a recent divorce petition filed by his wife, a psychiatrist named Janet Pine. That was intriguing. Divorce records can provide rich material on one or both of the spouses' personality traits, finances, sexual practices, propensity for violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and other vices—the behaviors that might lead to a scene like the one at the Hotel Constance. Some divorce files grew thick as books from the jousting by the parties. But the Pine filing was thin, short on details, and offered nothing about hotels or infidelities or overdoses. A bust.

Then the coroner's office got back to me: In the weeks after the incident at the Constance, there had been a sobering tally of deaths of young Angelenos, including from car crashes, suicides, murders, and, yes, drug overdoses. But none of the dead remotely resembled "Sarah" as Khan described her.

So the next step was to confront the Pasadena police. Going to the police before engaging USC was a tactical decision. USC president Max Nikias and his administrators had a long record of not responding in a helpful way to inquiries from the *Times* that weren't about positive stories—the gushy pieces that promoted the school's relentless campaign to burnish its national reputation. I had to make

the calculation of whether contacting USC first would sink my prospects of getting the police to talk. And that equation had to include the ties between USC and Pasadena, at least the ones on the surface. In some respects, the city of 141,000 seemed like a satellite campus of the university. Like the school, Pasadena was an early bastion of L.A.'s elite, having evolved from orchard land into a warm-weather resort town and one of the first affluent communities of the burgeoning Southern California metropolis. A Pasadena thoroughfare, Orange Grove Boulevard, became known as "Millionaires Row" because of the baronial homes that lined it. The Valley Hunt Club in Pasadena was among the pioneers of private social clubs in the L.A. region; it created what later became the Rose Parade in 1890.

A century and more later, Pasadena was home to USC faculty members and administrators and to well-heeled alumni and donors who worked in the law firms, banks, and brokerage firms of downtown L.A. USC graduates served on the Pasadena City Council. The mayor of the city from 1999 to 2015 had taught law at the university. Pasadena's pricey private high schools were feeders to USC. The university's name was on Pasadena's Pacific Asia Museum, and, for decades, the school managed the Gamble House, the city's internationally hailed masterpiece of arts and crafts architecture. Keck Medicine had a treatment center in Pasadena. And the USC president's residence was in neighboring San Marino, a sort of a wealthier appendage of Pasadena. The eight-bedroom, eleven-bathroom American colonial mansion rested on seven regally landscaped acres that had been donated in part by U.S. Army general George S. Patton, whose maternal grandfather was the second mayor of L.A. and whose father was an L.A. district attorney. Nikias used the estate to entertain and schmooze local power brokers and court others from Washington, D.C., to foreign capitals.

Altogether, it seemed reasonable to conclude that if there was one private institution outside its boundaries that Pasadena City Hall

took particular notice of and cared about, it was the University of Southern California. So I had to assume that a call or visit to USC about Puliafito would prompt the university to reach out to a friendly and influential contact in the city, if only to get ahead of my reporting. And that could lead to silence all around.

I was still of the mind that getting the basic story of the overdose would not take long. USC might not aid in my reporting, but it couldn't *deny* that the overdose occurred. It *could* deny knowing about Puliafito's presence at the overdose, although that would seem a huge stretch considering Khan's call to Nikias's office. I believed any denial would become irrelevant once I shared what I knew with Nikias and his administrators. They would be forced to address Puliafito's role in the overdose and whether it led to his resignation as dean.

Or would they?

On a Tuesday afternoon, I drove out to Pasadena and parked in a metered lot across from city hall, another local gem of a building, which was constructed during the City Beautiful movement of the 1920s. The fish-scale-tiled dome that rose six stories above Mediterranean archways was magnificent enough to crown a state capitol. The politicians who commissioned city hall promised it would be "suited to a land of flowers and sunshine." Ninety years on, its grace and richness still spoke to a presumed gentility that governed the affairs of the city. But official Pasadena had its share of rough edges. There were the controversial shootings of Black men by the police. And city hall itself became a crime scene in late 2014, when an analyst for its public works department was charged with embezzling more than \$6 million from the municipal coffers. The thievery had gone on for years.

I walked the block from the parking lot to the Pasadena Police Department headquarters, whose tall whitewashed arches were a nod to the look of city hall. The lobby for the records office closed off the light of the day. I explained why I was there to a woman who sat behind a long reception window spangled with intercom

speakers. She summoned someone from the inner warrens of the building, and, a few minutes later, Lieutenant Tracey Ibarra emerged from behind a secured door. Ibarra was a longtime veteran of the department and its media spokesperson and she did not look happy to see me. Maybe it was because my visit was unannounced—because I had not called or emailed ahead. Or maybe it was because the *Times* waged a long legal battle with Pasadena and the police union to get access to records on the fatal shooting of an unarmed nineteen-year-old Black man. The newspaper won that fight. I told Ibarra what I was looking for, starting with an incident or crime report on the overdose. I made the case that the report should be readily available. The lieutenant gave no ground other than to say she would look into it. I left empty-handed.

It was a three-minute walk from the police headquarters to the administrative office of the Pasadena Fire Department, which leased space in a low-rise commercial building with checkerboard windows. The fire department was a required stop because of the paramedic call, but patient privacy laws made it unlikely that my visit would yield much information. I told the woman who greeted visitors in the office that I wanted to speak to the fire chief or his representative. Neither was in, but the woman gave me the email address of the department's media contact, Lisa Derderian. I walked back to my car and sent her an email from my phone, marking it "urgent":

"Hi. I need information about a paramedic call last month for a story that I'm wrapping up. I'm only looking for the basic material that is released to the public."

To say I was wrapping up the story might have been part wishful thinking, but I was determined to get it filed quickly in case any other news outlet was snooping around. I ended the message to Derderian with my phone number, and she called me within the hour. Derderian gave me some details of the paramedic call, including that it was about an overdose, the location, times of day, and the hospital the woman was taken to—Huntington Hospital. It wasn't much; there

were no names of any of the people involved. But the times of day were important because they matched almost to the minute the times Khan had given me. The more I learned about the events of March 4 and their aftermath, the more credible he became.

Later that day, shortly before 6:30 P.M., I received an email from Melissa Trujillo, a police department supervisor. She wrote:

Mr. Pringle, I received your request for incident 6PA0021560 from Lt. Ibarra. Attached you will find a redacted copy of the incident [report] you requested.

Whoa! I hadn't expected Ibarra to release the report that quickly—if at all. Could the Pasadena PD be committing itself to transparency? Was it tired of being sued? Even before I read the attachment, I asked myself if there was time to get a story posted on the *Times's* website that night, based on the police report. It would be tight—I would have to reach out to Puliafito and USC before filing—but I had to worry about the possible competition. What if Ibarra was releasing the report to the two Pasadena newspapers? Or to the broadcast stations? All would love a story about a medical school dean mixed up in a drug overdose.

Then I opened the attachment . . . *Never mind*. It wasn't a police report but a Call for Service log, a record of the police response in an assistance capacity to a paramedic call. The document was two pages of call times and puzzling acronyms and abbreviations, with just a snippet of narrative. The name of the reporting party was redacted—blacked out. But the log had several references to either an “overdose,” “odose” or “OD,” and a misspelled one to “chrystal meth.”

It had no other details that I could hang a story on. Nothing about a potential crime.

Four lines on the log said either “Disposition: RPT,” “Dispo: RPT,” or “Closed dispo: REPORT.” So some type of report must have been filed about the overdose. Was the Call for Service log

considered a report? That would be strange—a notation on a report referring to the report itself? I supposed it was possible, in view of the quirky and often inscrutable ways bureaucracies communicated with themselves.

An interview could clear it up. I called Ibarra to request one with police chief Phillip Sanchez. I wanted to ask him why a *crime* report hadn't been taken and filed. Ibarra suggested the incident at the Hotel Constance might have been a medical emergency and not a police matter, so there was no reason to file a crime report. That didn't seem right. What about Puliafito? He didn't overdose, and illegal drugs were found in his hotel room. Didn't that make him a potential crime suspect? Didn't that require a report? Those are questions I had for Sanchez. Except he was unwilling to be interviewed, which I took to mean he saw no upside for himself, the police department, or city hall to breathe any life into my story. If everything was aboveboard, the chief should have been happy to speak to me.

But what I surmised was different from what I could report. All I had to place Puliafito at the scene of the overdose was Khan's off-the-record account. Which wasn't enough for publication.

It was time to take matters to USC.

Ideally, I would have first gathered more information that I could use to arm-twist the Nikias administration into coming clean about Puliafito, such as a witness to confirm what Khan had told me. I would have hounded my USC sources for anything they might be hearing. I would have searched the Web for the names and social media accounts of Pasadena police officers and paramedics, used that information to scour the *Times's* databases for their addresses, and then knocked on their doors. But that would take time, which I believed I didn't have. I had to act on the presumption that my queries of the police would fly up the chains of command, including those in city hall, and reach USC. And that could get people talking—including to rival media outlets. Apart from the Pasadena newspapers and TV stations, I worried about USC's student paper

and news website. Those kids were smart, resourceful, and aggressive about covering their own school. They must be wondering why the dean of the medical school gave up his post on a random Thursday afternoon. I needed to move fast.

I began calling the USC executive offices to inquire about Puliafito's sudden resignation as dean. I did not divulge that I knew about the overdose, but I did stress that I had questions about the circumstances that might have prompted his resignation. I did not hear back from Nikias or his inner circle.

Then, out of the blue, I received an email from Puliafito, whom I had yet to contact. With the subject line "Transition from Deanship," it read:

I understand from colleagues here at USC that you've been inquiring about my stepping down as Dean of the medical school. I wanted to reach out to you directly and let you know that my decision was entirely my own. The timing of my decision was related to a unique, time limited opportunity in the biotech industry, something which I am looking forward to sharing with others soon. USC was nice enough to grant me a sabbatical to explore this opportunity. Bottom line, I was Dean for almost a decade. It was great, but I was ready and open to jumping on these opportunities when they came along.

Nothing, of course, about a young woman or an overdose at the Hotel Constance.

It occurred to me that Puliafito never would have sent the email if he wasn't confident that Nikias would not contradict it—that USC would protect him.

I hadn't expected USC to grant me much in the way of cooperation. That was based on my earlier reporting on the university, including

the investigations of Pete Carroll and Pat Haden as well as a broader one into the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, where USC played football. Max Nikias and the people around him had behaved more like bunkered corporate executives than stewards of an academic institution. Silence and secrecy were their preferred methods of engagement with me. They rarely agreed to interviews, and they responded to my written queries largely with parsed answers that were meant to frustrate my reporting. There was no mistaking that they didn't believe they had to deal with me, a lowly reporter, because they represented the real power in L.A.

The Coliseum investigation brought a lesson in how much weight USC carried in the city. The publicly owned stadium, a National Historic Landmark whose peristyled bowl sits across Exposition Boulevard from the campus, is an L.A. crown jewel. It hosted the Olympic Summer Games in 1932 and 1984. Over the years, it also had served as home for the Rams, the Los Angeles Raiders, UCLA football, and briefly the Los Angeles Dodgers and Los Angeles Chargers. The Coliseum was where John F. Kennedy delivered his acceptance speech for the 1960 Democratic presidential nomination, and where Pope John Paul II celebrated a Mass that drew one hundred thousand worshippers. In 2011, I and my colleagues Andrew Blankstein and Rong-Gong Lin II published a series of stories showing that Coliseum managers took millions in bribes and kickbacks from concert promoters and a stadium contractor. We also reported that the managers directed Coliseum business to companies they owned, delivered suitcases of cash to union bosses, and spent tens of thousands in public funds on massages, golf tournaments, luxury cars, and other perks. Ron and I went on to disclose that someone at the Coliseum allowed a porn producer to do a night shoot of *Gangbang Girl #32* on the football field. All together, our stories led to six indictments that resulted in a string of guilty and no-contest pleas. The scandal showed that corruption of an impressive temerity was alive and well in the



City of Angels—that a nonfiction take on L.A. noir was not a thing of the past. And it presented USC, which had not been implicated in any of the wrongdoing, with an opportunity to flex its political muscles.

The school had always been merely a tenant at the Coliseum, the Trojans playing there under lease agreements with the government commission that operated the stadium. But USC had long coveted control of the property, and now that the commissioners were red-faced over our findings, the university went to work on them. They were a mix of elected officials and appointees representing the city and county of L.A. and the state. USC and Nikias had sway with most of them. In the heat of our reporting, the commission president, David Israel, a Hollywood producer, pushed to give USC what it wanted—a ninety-nine-year master lease of the Coliseum, the next best thing to outright ownership. Israel was originally appointed to the body by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. As the commission prepared to hand over the Coliseum to USC, Nikias accepted a combined \$20 million donation and fundraising pledge from the then former governor to establish the nebulously named USC Schwarzenegger Institute for State and Global Policy. USC also granted the movie-star-turned-politician a professorship. There were whispers of revulsion among the faculty. This was nine years after the *Times*, in the run-up to Schwarzenegger's 2003 election as governor, reported on his history of sexual harassment. But it was five years before the dawn of the #MeToo movement. Women faculty members who were appalled by Nikias's money-minded indulgence of Schwarzenegger could not stop the arrangement. Nikias was two years into his presidency, and my sources at the university were telling me the tenor of his administration had made it plain that open rebukes of him would not be tolerated.

The commission voted 8–1 to give USC its master lease (delays reduced its term to ninety-eight years), in exchange for the university's

pledge to make at least \$70 million in near-term improvements to the stadium, which had been valued at \$650 million after planned renovations. The lease gave USC all receipts from ticket and concession sales, parking fees, and stadium advertising buys, in return for an annual rent outlay that started at \$1 million. The university got 95 percent of the millions of dollars in naming rights to the Coliseum. USC agreed to a small split of the stadium profits with the government if the school reported any. Experts on such deals predicted the university would be careful to never show a profit on paper.

To sweeten the terms even more, the commission threw in the Sports Arena, which USC later had razed to make way for a flashy soccer stadium for the professional Los Angeles Football Club, another source of revenue for the school.

The lone holdout in the commission's vote was Bernard Parks, a former L.A. police chief and city councilman. Parks was a Trojan himself, but he believed the lease ripped off the taxpayers and particularly those who lived in USC's South L.A. neighborhood, most of them nonwhite and lower income. He said the deal demonstrated that USC knew how to "turn their alumni out to work on people," meaning the university's trustees and those graduates with big bank accounts and connections.

"It was basically a club of wealthy people," Parks said. "It was all about entitlement and money."

Ron and I reported on the Coliseum giveaway, but there wasn't much of an outcry over the public getting stiffed. The muted response wasn't uncharacteristic for L.A. A small network of political movers and shakers usually managed to accommodate the likes of USC without drawing crowds of vocal skeptics. In that sense, L.A. lived up to its "laid-back" image.

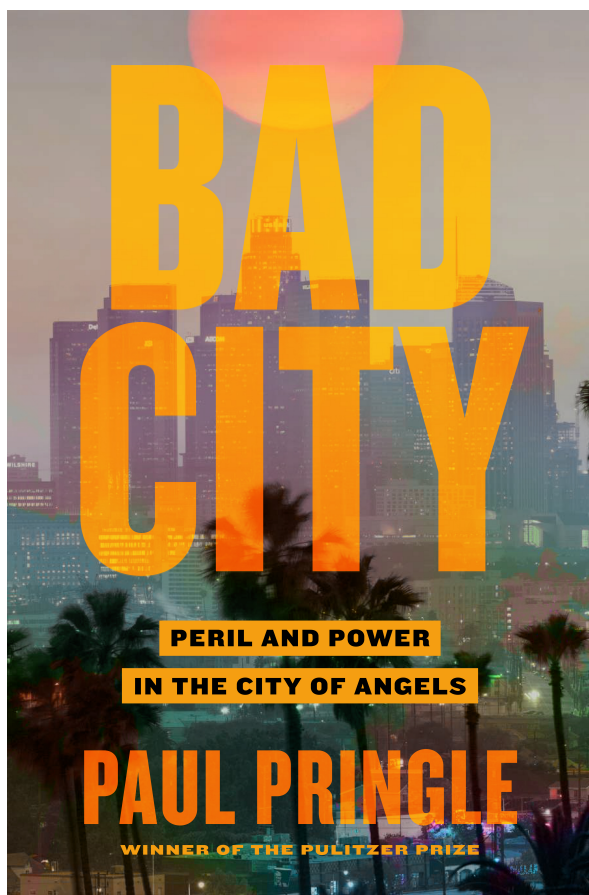
It was a city where people didn't look too hard at things—if they looked at all.

And that made life easier for the Max Nikiases.

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Before I became an investigative reporter, I worked for three decades as a general assignment writer and L.A.-based bureau chief. I covered local, state, national, and occasionally foreign news, writing breaking news stories and longer-term feature pieces on subjects ranging from earthquakes and riots to celebrity murder trials and orchestra pits to presidential campaigns and the war in Northern Ireland. I loved every minute of it. But by the mid-2000s, investigative reporting had become a critical priority as newspapers shrank under financial pressures from the Web. Newspapers still did investigative reporting better and in much greater volume than any other medium, and that had to continue. So I decided it was time to make a transition to investigations, and they gradually became my specialty.

They were challenging in a motivating way. Many investigative stories required us to uncover or even solve crimes with little more than our wits and powers of persuasion. There were many times when that wasn't enough, and we couldn't get sufficient corroborating information to publish our findings, which allowed the bad guys to escape. But when we pulled it off, the intrinsic rewards were enormous, because we had brought justice to people who otherwise would have been denied it. I had seen plenty of injustice go uncorrected in my years of covering breaking news and writing feature stories—defenseless folks being crushed by the people and institutions responsible for serving and safeguarding them. It was gratifying to direct light on their suffering through day-to-day news reporting or longer features. But it was *infinitely* more fulfilling to take down the villains with an investigative project. In this late stage of my career, that's what I was all about as a journalist.



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