

# THE LONG GOODBYE

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"I sleep with a lot of girls but I make love to you." Marty Augustine, career criminal, says in *The Long Goodbye*.

Robert Altman's rendering of Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye* (1973) intros with a hot blast of Benny Goodman's swinging, stinging "Hooray For Hollywood" over a close-up of a carved metal plaque, mostly in shadow, depicting palm trees, unfathomable roads and the word "Hollywood." The camera pans right, into an intimate space containing a slightly ruffled bed and a fully dressed man lying there, on his back. It's Philip Marlowe, having his last-ever moment of peace.

The first line of Altman's movie is "Meow," spoken repeatedly by a hairy orange metaphor, a hungry cat. As Marlowe (Elliott Gould) rises to meet the demands of the feline, he tells us it's 3 a.m. and lights his first Camel, a gesture commencing a ceaseless cavalcade of smoking and other signs pegging him to the past and foreshadowing his future. But back to kitty: Marlowe's out of Finicky's food brand and can't satisfy with homemade victuals. He leaves his apartment for a trip to the Thrifty Mart and by the time he gets into his 1948 Lincoln Continental Cabriolet Convertible, we know he's a guy with a code from prime-time noir, living in a town that's moved on.

He brings back the only cat food he can score and as no good deed goes unpunished in Tinseltown, the cat runs off in disgust. The next 100 minutes are a succession of fickle, human-type cats, each of whom demands something from Marlowe. The first to arrive is Terry Lennox, a failed actor turned bag man and Marlowe's second-best friend (after Finicky). Lennox shows up asking for a ride to Tijuana where maybe he's just gonna cool his heels after a fight with his wife. "Don't worry about *me*," Lennox says as he steps out of the Lincoln at dawn.

Marlowe returns from the border. Plainclothes cops are waiting to arrest him for abetting Lennox who may have killed his wife. He spends the rest of the movie trying to prove to himself that his pal didn't commit the crime.

Gould's Marlowe is a parboiled detective. Throughout the movie he repeats, "That's okay with me" as we approach his next collision with demand and disappointment. His sardonic wit, nonchalance and cautious softness for the characters he encounters make him inviting in a way that other movie Marlowes aren't. And this noir is more of a chiaroscuro, with dark spaces illuminated by flashes of light, by tonal shifts as punctuation. Marlowe's mostly naked, pleasingly serene neighbors, the "yoga ladies," are a chipper Greek Chorus, bringing us into the near future. They dip candles, eat yogurt, stretch and perform modern dance on the shared balcony in full view of all of Los Angeles.

Altman was ever at odds with Hollywood and what doesn't actually describe it here is a direct poke at its clichés: "Nobody cares." Lennox says. "Yeah, nobody cares but me." Marlowe replies. "Well, that's you, Marlowe. You'll never learn. You're a born loser," Lennox responds. And this edition of *The Long Goodbye* takes the ultimate liberty with Chandler's novel: Marlowe becomes one with the present when he subverts his own code in the penultimate scene.

The last line of this movie is "Blam!," spoken by a gun.

Moments later, on his way down a tree-lined path in Mexico, Marlowe summons the joie to play the world's tiniest harmonica. He then gently grabs an old lady and gives her a once-around twirl as the soundtrack recording from "Hollywood Hotel" replete with hiss and pops, repeats Benny Goodman, ever more stinging with Johnny Mercer's verse. As he bears away, Marlowe kicks up his heels. That's okay with me.