

smARTfilms

# darkness at noon

## **Night Moves (1975) film notes by Tova Gannana**



Harry Moseby (Gene Hackman) enters the film *Night Moves* (1975) making a right turn in search of a parking spot. He is lanky and muscular, he has a mustache and a comb-over. He never wears a hat. The city he lives in is L.A. He eats ice cream in his office, he has no secretary to take notes, or hang up his coat, or call out, "Wait a minute, Mr. Moseby," no clients with urgent cases drumming their fingers on his desk. He has an answering machine, and a job offer at an "information factory" his wife wants him to take, where he claims he'd, "go bananas in a week." He's on his own. He's never fit in; something he's always known. Harry's first line in *Night Moves* is, "Where's my old lady?" Ellen (Susan Clark), his wife, sells antiques. She sits at her desk in a two-tone satin blue suit. Behind her, Harry stands unseen. With one hand he covers her eyes; he reaches down her shirt with

the other. Startled she says over the phone, "It's too late now mister even as it's been too late since Monday." She crumples a bill she's been holding, "Now look let's just forget the whole thing. Past, present and future." Later that evening she'll go to a Rohmer film with Marty Heller (Harry Yulin), a man Harry doesn't know exists.

In the part of L.A. that Harry circles there are wide streets and boat-like cars. The buildings are no more than two stories as though the humidity got to the workers, and they left for the beach. Harry's office appears to be from the end of the 1940's, locked up and the key thrown away, the only window a half-circle with blinds. Harry listens to a message left on his machine, "I've got one for you that needs a real live detective and not one of our computers." The case the man is tossing to Harry involves, "A lady called Arlene Iverson 1536 Sunset Plaza. She's looking to get her daughter home." Harry switches out of a powder blue and into a brown sports coat. In his car, he listens to a tape with information on Mrs. Iverson (Janet Ward) and her runaway sixteen-year-old daughter Delly (Melanie Griffith), some of it makes him laugh. The sun has set and before him, a marquee is lit with *My Night at Maud's*, the theater emptying out. Harry pulls up and parks, about to say hello, but Ellen is not alone. She is walking with a man



arm in arm, he has a cane, they get into a car, they kiss in the front seat. Harry is inquisitive about others but not himself. He sees what is unspoken but misses what is said. He trails Ellen and Marty writing down the license plate, cars behind him honking, he's stopped at a green light.



The case he has begun is not one but many and can't neatly be closed. Just as Harry takes a stab, so do others at him. Arlene Iverson on her couch in a yellow room with floor to ceiling windows, a view of the canyon below and Harry by the piano, says flirtatiously, "Are you the kind of detective who once you get on a case nothing can get you off? Bribes, beatings, the allure of a woman's body." Quentin (James Woods), a mechanic and one of the last to see Delly, snarls at Harry and tosses back his card, "Moseby Confidential, what kind of bullshit name is that?" Marty, a ladies man and Ellen's lover says, "Come on take a swing

at me Harry the way Sam Spade would," after being followed by Harry to his white clapboard house overlooking the Pacific. Paula (Jennifer Warren), Delly's stepfather Tom Iverson's (John Crawford) girlfriend in the Florida Keys, sunburned, blonde and beautiful, says to Harry, "Do you ask these questions because you want to know the answer or is it just something you think a detective should do?" He replies, "I just want you to know I am here." And maybe that's it, Harry wants to know he is here.

Harry looks for Delly through the people who have seen her last; Quentin, Marv Ellman (Anthony Costello) a stuntman, and Joey Ziegler (Edward Binns) a film producer, all of whom know Delly and Arlene, and more importantly, Tom Iverson. Harry will find Delly in the Florida Keys in an old beach resort with Tom and Paula. Harry questions Tom about the setup, "Has Delly been giving you any trouble? The kind you wouldn't want the cops to know about." Tom in a sailor cap and sun-bleached clothing says, "Harry, you see I get pretty foolish with her and well you've seen her. God there ought to be a law." Harry, his gaze unwavering says, "There is." Out on the dark water as Paula's driving Tom's boat, Harry asks her, "What did you do before this?" She answers, "I taught school, I kept house, I waited tables, I did a little stripping, I did a little hooking and I trod a lot of water." He looks at her while she speaks. He says, "Sounds kind of bleak. Or is it just the way you tell it." Beside the boat, Delly is swimming naked in the water. Diving, she finds a downed plane and in the cockpit a pilot, his face being bitten away by fish. That night Delly tells Harry she wants to return to L.A. She says wrapped in a blanket, "People are shitty but you're ok." What Harry doesn't know, what Tom and Paula are keeping from him, keeping him busy on getting Delly to go home, is that Tom and Paula, the drowned pilot, Joey Ziegler, and Quentin are all connected to one another like roots to a tree.

Delly and Harry return to L.A. but it's not the end of the case. Harry lies down on his desk in his office, he has a message on his machine from Delly and at first she sounds happy, "Bonjour private eye, it's your last case speaking have you found anymore little lost girls?" then her voice changes, "Hey Harry, I want to talk to you about something. I think you might be interested to know who -" Harry doesn't hear the rest of her message. Ellen is knocking at his door. The "who" in the Iverson case is what he needed to break it.



The night they find the dead pilot, Paula standing in the moonlight, breathing in the salty air, a drink in her hand, the sound of bullfrogs in the distance, Harry in shadows, asks him, "Where were you when Kennedy got shot?" He replies, "Which Kennedy?" *Night Moves* is about the past because the thing about a past is everyone's got one. America has a past, even while we pretend that America is six-

teen-year-olds happy at home when really they are running from it. In America, anything can be justified, like killing a President and his public servant brother, or a sixteen-year-old girl. Harry's frustration is he can't make sense of the case because how can you make sense of people being killed to keep them silent. Harry will go one more time to the Florida Keys. Ellen's last line to Harry will be at the airport with the sound of a plane about to take off, "If you don't go now you can't come back." And it's not certain he will. Paula takes Harry out in the boat at sunrise to show him what the planes have been dropping in the sea. Harry bloodied and angry, says to Paula, "I want to know what it's all about. You, what the hell are you all about?" He will know but it will be too late, he'll be on the boat alone circling the way he used to circle L.A. "It was so simple," Tom's accomplice Joey Ziegler had said to Harry, in a darkened studio theatre halfway through the case. Harry sat taking mental notes, but Harry never guessed Joey was talking about something else.



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