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A PISCES DANCER

by
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CHAPTER ONE

Santa Ana winds spread across the Southland. I smoke a cigarette on my apartment balcony, off Entrada Lane. The hillside tumbles through narrow lanes and stunted wind-swept oaks to the shore. The widening blue Pacific gleams beyond the rooftops. *Torn skirt. A memory. Abandoned by a musician stoned on speed.* That's how I found Renee, on the side of the road. *You read books, she said; I can tell...*

It's the Fall of 1983. Los Angeles is preparing for the Summer Olympics. I've just turned thirty-five; Renee has been out of my life exactly three years.

I leave my coffee on the balcony rail and turn back into the bedroom. The red clay tiles feel cool and damp against my feet. I slip on a blue shirt and pressed jeans. I could stand to lose a few pounds and tone up my arms and abdomen. There was a time when I was more athletic and aggressive. At eight-thirty, I climb in my dusty MG and drive east, towards Hollywood.

The hot city struggles into focus. Shop windows reflect a bone white light. The office elevator is jammed. Everyone stands in strict silence. The doors open; half the people empty out.

A small boy leans his almond-shaded head against his mother's waist. The Filipino business man in the corner coughs, twisting his face into the Los Angeles Times. Miss Rigby, the rouged nurse, taps her moon white shoe. There is a hint of appeal between the mother's dreamy eyes and my own silent glances. She leaves the elevator with her son, fluttering down the dark marble hallway, like birds escaping my stare.

My name and profession - Alan Storm, Psychotherapist - are stenciled in black, across the frosted glass inset of the office door. Light through the blinds stripes my desk like piano keys. I make a mental note to scrub the Mr. Coffee pot in the men's lav down the hall. Donna The Actress will soon arrive. Donna with the pink, heart-shaped mouth, slender hips, long showgirl legs.

"He knows my sense of humor," she says, scooching cozily in the naugahyde chair across from me. "And that means a lot." Donna's blond, ribboned braids fall against her lavender sweater. She casts a freckled pout, explaining that Luis, the carhop with the dark mysterious eyes, seems reluctant to sleep with her.

"But you want to go to bed with him, don't you?"

She gives me a shocked look. "I told you, Alan, I don't even think about it."

My fee is seventy-five dollars an hour. I ask decent questions; I listen well. Many of my clients are struggling

actors and writers. For them, in fact, for just about anyone, I discount my fee.

I eat lunch at a Hollywood storefront café with tables that spill onto the sidewalk. I gulp down a veggie burger and trade small talk with Ned, a burned-out musician whose nicotine-stained teeth are rotting from drugs. He rambles on about the Hollywood rock scene and his girlfriend, Randy, who just landed a part in a low budget flick. "Soft porno," he says. "Like what isn't, today? This ain't the sixties, Alan. No peace marches, no weekends on acid, no free love. We're closing the century with a knife in the door."

The nicotine-stained smile creeps back and I think to myself that the knife is locked in my heart.

Driving from my Hollywood office back to Entrada Lane I think of Joyce Dundy, my afternoon client, a smart, fashionable lady, living with a guy who won't talk to her. I wonder whether she really loves him or whether she's simply afraid to give him up to another woman. In this terrible heat, I wish a thunderstorm were splashing off my windshield, the wipers dancing to the radio music. Not here though, not in L.A. where we are teased and wooed by flashes of false threatening signs. The car seat is hot, stiff and wet on my back. My shirt chaffs my chest. Joyce has no chance with Roger Gutierre. The big fight will happen a month from now. She'll come in tears to my office, burying her face in her hands. Roger will be gone. Who could this man be, I wonder, to have such power over her?

In my apartment above the garage, where my landlord stores his deceased wife's brown sedan, I make myself a plate of scrambled eggs, toast, and rice. The sky is dark. The moon hides, then comes out, poking its face between the busy clouds. Everything in my life now reminds me of sex. Seated at my writing desk, I remember Renee. *Skin, in the shade, like maple. Dark eyes like a huntress'. Her mouth pursed to the side, opening slowly into a golden smile. Breasts showing their fullness beneath a white blouse, even though she wasn't thinking of them, or flaunting her body. Only her angry sober self staring at me.*

I start the letter I've written and rewritten, in my head, in my heart, on paper, napkins, the backs of envelopes, a thousand times: You would know how I feel if you could hear my voice, grown so dim since you left. I reach inside to feel you but you're not there. To touch you would cause the earth to shake under my feet....

Angrily, I crumple up the letter. So sophomoric and silly! It's been three years since she left. Renee would expect more pride from me. She left, that's all there is to it.

The moon follows me to my bedroom window. I'm restless, unable to sleep. I leap out of bed, press the pen to paper in a small circle of candle light. I reach for music. Nothing I hear is right. A Spanish radio station is as close as I get to the music I need. Romantic twists and turns, outlandish soulful cries of distress. A three a.m. roller-coaster music of the heart.

I run to the refrigerator and open a Dos Equis.

Now, finally, I can write this goddamned letter! The words start spilling out on page two: *You cried to me, how alone we are, how beaten down by the dark moments of truth. You even cut your wrists once, you told me, out of the desperation of knowing you had already failed a life that had just begun. You gave up...* The thought comes crashing through the Hispanic bubbles in my head. Did I love the shivering guttural death sounds in her voice? Not her tears, her fragrant breasts and insatiable cunt! Not her Indian cheekbones, muscular thighs and mouth that was a lake of spiritual betrayal. It was that astounding pit of death inside her I wanted my hands on! That's what got my cock hard. Death! I'm reeling with the discovery of a knowledge certain to change my life forever! I tear the letter into shreds. I don't need to tell her anything now that I know! "Good night, sweetheart. These are the last words you'll hear from me!"

I'm off to sleep. Still unfocused, still desperately in need of hands to shape me, I breath in the dark sheets of ocean wind.