

Nikki

The party was smoke and noise, forty or fifty people jammed into the second floor of an old beachfront clapboard house, two big speakers against the wall hammering out bone-cracking throbs that vibrated the floor, and over the bass line the non-stop garbled shouts of a pissed-off rapper. Conversations were bellowed, joints passed, a hazy deafening blur, it was too much.

There was a time when it would have been fun, a party like this. Well, maybe not fun but amusing. Now everyone was so young and, Jesus, she was only twenty-seven.

A glass of wine in one hand a cigarette in the other, Nikki eased away from the guy who had been trying to talk to her. Not Benjamin. Benjamin was over on the other side of the room yelling in the ear of the skinny kid in rimless glasses who lived here. He looked like he was fourteen and was supposed to be a programming genius.

The guy trying to talk to her seemed okay if a little out-of-place; clean-cut, jacket no tie and older, if maybe thirty was older. He looked like a junior professor at a girl's school. She couldn't hear a thing he was saying. She'd really had it with this party.

"Gotta go!" she screamed at him, "Nice talking to you!" turning away, not caring if he heard or understood. Jesus, what a zoo.

She pushed open the sagging screen door with an elbow and made her way down the dilapidated wooden stairs along the outside wall, still with the glass in one hand and cigarette in the other, wary of her silk dress and the flaking paint, watching for the cracks between the boards.

Following a narrow alleyway she emerged onto a wide sidewalk, the boardwalk that ran along the beach.

And there was the Pacific Ocean.

The sun had just gone below the horizon and a swath of neon pink and fuchsia sunset splashed across the sky.

“Fake,” she breathed, thinking it looked like a set decorator’s idea of a sunset, a wash of vibrant color on a pale blue scrim, way too over the top.

Nikki crossed the sidewalk, took the big step from the concrete down onto the sand and after two clumsy strides, her feet sinking, stopped and looked around to make sure no one was watching; or if someone was watching, and usually someone was, making sure at least it wasn’t a cop. There was a scattering of passersby on the boardwalk, a couple of roller skaters, but . . . what the hell. She dropped the glass where she stood. Littering a California beach, a major felony, probably punishable by death.

*I'm a naughty girl  
You needn't sham  
You know I am.*

It came to her mind in Theatre Speech, that fake British accent everyone had to learn in drama school, so it must have been something she’d heard or had even sung herself, but she couldn’t think where.

Standing first on one foot then on the other, she pulled off her open-toe heels. The sand would raise hell with her pedicure but on the other hand Benjamin wouldn’t be looking at her toenails.

Holding the shoes by the straps, she trudged across the strand to where the beach slipped down into the ocean, the wet, compacted shingle. The tide had turned and the waves dissolved in a mild foamy wash that rolled softly up and over her feet.

Wondering if Benjamin would follow she turned and looked back. The building she had come from, half-hidden behind the row of newer, nicer places, had once been an ugly

green color. Now it was an ugly dusty weather-beaten green color, leaning a little to one side, as if from the wind. She couldn't hear the music.

It doesn't carry, she thought, no reach, no. . . what? Just nothing. Like everything else. Who cared? It just didn't matter.

She looked for what did matter, her want, her desire, her ambition. She called it all those things, sometimes one, sometimes the other. It wasn't there. For the first time since she'd come to Los Angeles, since way before she'd come to L.A., it wasn't there. MIA. It was kind of strange, a little scary, not to be able to feel it. It was her guide, the thing that kept her going. All that was left in its place were a bunch of don't wants. She didn't want to be at the party. She didn't want to smoke a couple joints, she didn't want to go home with Benjamin. She knew if she did she'd end up letting him screw her and she didn't want to. Even if she didn't feel like it, if she went home with him he'd be at her and she knew she'd give in and she'd end up with the vague shitty feeling of having done something she didn't really want to do. And yet, what difference did it make? Wherever she was these days it was like she was somewhere she didn't want to be. Away. She just wanted to be away from it all. Benjamin. Eventually he'd ask her about the part in the movie. Telling him had been a mistake. When she'd gotten home that night, showered, wrapped herself in her fluffy robe, she was so crazy she had to talk to somebody, tell somebody something. So she called him and said she had the part, she was sure she had it.

Especially she didn't want to have to go through that, go back over it in her mind and make up the lies she would tell Benjamin if and when he remembered to ask.

She took a final drag from her cigarette and flipped the butt toward the surf. As she did she remembered she had left her little black clutch bag holding a pack of Parliaments and her Dunhill lighter on the kitchen counter where she had been standing. She didn't want

to lose the lighter. Michael Brokton, that wonderful character actor, had given it to her the night he'd taken her to the Oscars two years ago. It didn't matter that she hadn't talked to him since, it was a high point, the lighter a souvenir. It was a Dunhill Pinstripe Palladium Rollagas, a goddamned five-hundred dollar lighter engraved with the date.

Shit.

She made her way back across the sand. When she reached the gap up to the sidewalk she decided to hell with the dress, turned around and sat down on the concrete, brushing at her feet. The grit wouldn't come off, stuck between her toes. She decided she didn't really care, she didn't want to put her shoes on and she didn't want to go back inside. She didn't want to do anything. But she was hungry and she needed a cigarette. She sat there holding her shoes in her lap watching the night fold out over the Pacific, thinking about Michael Brokton and the Oscars and how the trades always mentioned his captivating crooked smile, thinking about the lighter in her purse on the kitchen counter and thinking about how much she didn't want to end up letting Benjamin take her home and screw her.

Maybe it was the setting, the ocean, the sky, the sunset, the inexorable gathering of day into night, this perfect seascape evening sliding away forever down the western slope of the world. Maybe it was a moment of lonely calm. From wherever it came, the awareness floated into her mind that she didn't like herself anymore.

It was creepy, this wanting to float off into nothingness, never again having to look at her face in a mirror, let go of it all, the endless pretending. It was as solemn as the grave, this icy feeling that curled around inside her, as if she had reached a point where she could let herself simply wink out and cease to be, like the sun sinking into night.

She knew where the feeling came from. It was the aftermath, the fall-out. Last week. Last week had been . . . had been . . .

Tuesday of last week she'd come out of the hotel room, the Ritz-Carlton Laguna Beach hotel room, the heavy door swinging closed behind her, the lock clicking into place with the oak-embedded finality of steel against steel. It was like the last sound that echoes through the theatre at the very end of a really good noir picture, the audience hushed, then the sound of that clicking lock breaks the tension and everyone knows it's over and they can start breathing again.

The door closed behind her, she walked down the hallway, even the hallways rich and luxurious, feeling strangely proud of herself. Hell, that wasn't so bad. If that's all it took, if that's all it was. She could do that. Not as a regular thing, no. But if that's what it took, she could do it.

She'd been tipsy, well actually pretty piddily-eyed, but that wasn't an excuse. She knew what was happening every moment, saw it with the clarity that comes with enough champagne cocktails. You might not be able to drive too well — though actually after it was all over she had driven herself home, no problem — but you could see the face and the eyes of the person you were with see what was behind them. And she'd seen that he wanted her for the picture, that he'd made up his mind, she had the part. They sat in that wonderful cocktail lounge, damask silk sofas that looked like French antiques, floor-to-ceiling windows at the top of a hundred-foot cliff above the Pacific and they'd had a wonderful conversation. He was completely charming and of course he knew everyone and his stories were so witty and perceptive, gems, insider anecdotes that made her laugh and flattered her, gathered her into the warmth of his circle of friends. He was a raconteur, he really was, that wasn't just something they said about him. So after a couple hours she'd gone with him up to his room, unsure, a little fluttering in her stomach. He said he needed to give her the script.

When she was sitting on the bed and he stood in front of her, he took her hand and

put it on him, told her to go ahead and take it out. She didn't want to. She didn't want it to come down to this, hated that it turned out to be this. Yet it was such a good part, it was going to be a big-budget, a tentpole picture. And she really didn't want to disappoint him, everything had been so perfect.

She did what he wanted.

With lovers she'd liked doing it. It was so intense, the sensuality, the idea that she could have a man inside her this way, too; it drove her excitement. But this was just get it over with. He was saying something, his words lost above her head, her mind a metronome, get it over with, get it over with.

She could tell when he was about to finish and tried to pull away but he held her and she had no choice.

When he finally released her she ran into the bathroom, spit in the sink and used the Listerine and sat on the closed toilet lid and told herself to calm down, to stop thinking about it, to get the picture out of her mind. But of course she couldn't. After a while she went out, feeling acutely awkward, her legs wooden, not looking at him, picked up her purse and went back in the bathroom and closed the door. She washed her face where her eyes had watered, fixed her lipstick, reapplied her mascara and brushed her hair. When she couldn't put it off any longer she went back out and he was very nice, so kind and really, she had to admit, terribly thoughtful. He'd opened the drapes. There was a furniture grouping in front of the window wall that looked out over the swimming pool and tennis courts, and he took her hand and led her to a chaise and seated her as if she were royalty. He poured Chardonnay from a bottle in a silver bucket, all iced and ready, yeah, he was a producer, all right, and handed her a beautiful fluted glass that might have been Baccarat crystal. It was as if nothing had happened and they were back on the same footing they'd been on when they

were having drinks downstairs except now there was something more. He was so easy and gracious that by the time they'd finished the Chardonnay and she walked out of the hotel room, her head spinning, she felt like she'd come through it all unscathed.

The next day she called the studio, the number he'd written on the cover of the script. When she gave her name the secretary took a few seconds to find a list then said in a flat and uninterested voice: "Oh, yeah, sorry, casting is complete."

Fuck.

That bastard. Such an asshole.

And she was such a dunce. A cocksucking slut.

She spent the day at the gym, sweating like a stevedore, finding her way into a tough, cynical, shell where nothing could touch her.

And now, sitting on the sidewalk looking at the ocean, she felt betrayed from within, undercut by the dark hollowness that had coalesced in the pit of her stomach.

She shivered. It was darker.

Her black clutch bag floated in front of her and for a second she thought she was hallucinating or the black shape of a UFO had materialized in the sky. Then she realized what it was, heard his voice.

"You left your purse."

The clean-cut guy.

She took the bag from his hand without looking up and felt his presence as he sat beside her, close but not touching.

"You're a lifesaver," unzipping the bag, taking out the Parliaments, shaking out a cigarette, fishing for the lighter. "I was dying for a cigarette but I couldn't stand the thought of going back in. I was sitting here feeling sorry for myself." Was that what she'd been doing?

When she brought out the lighter he reached over and took it, not letting her hand go, keeping it cupped with both his as he snapped a flame and she got the cigarette going.

She turned, blew a stream of smoke out of the side of her mouth, examined him. “That was very smooth, very Cary Grant.” He had a nice, open face and broad shoulders beneath a tweed jacket.

“I surprised myself. I’m not that cool, I mean, I don’t even smoke. But it seemed like the thing to do.” He paused a second. “Can I tell you the truth?” He went on, not waiting for an answer, a little clumsy: “I just wanted to touch your hand. I’m trying hard, you see, you’re so pretty —”

She reached up and put two fingers to his lips, stopping him, then let her hand slide along his cheek. He had a good jaw, she felt his whiskers. She liked that, too. Maybe it was just that she’d been lonely and feeling sorry for herself. After all, what had happened, really? She’d been a little frightened about her career, tried too hard, done something stupid. It happened.

And now here was this sweet guy, clearly smitten.

“Don’t say it,” she said. “Don’t say all the obvious things, how pretty I am, how you saw me across a crowded room.” He made the darkness recede, she felt it fading. Was it him or just anyone? No, it needed to be the right sort of someone with a nice jaw and sincere brown eyes. “Well, you can say how you saw me across a crowded room, that’s so corny and it does have a song.”

His cheek felt warm against her palm. Men were so silly. When you touched them unexpectedly they got all flummoxed. She watched the confusion it caused him, saw he was a little shy, liked him for it. Maybe he could be Cary Grant and she could be Eva Marie Saint and it might be *North by Northwest* if Hitchcock had shot it on the beach in Venice.

She lowered her voice, picking up the deepening shadows: “It’s enough that we’ve found each other.” She watched him. It was right there in his face. He’d never met anyone like her.

“Yes.”

“But listen, darling,” she let fear come across her eyes, expanding the moment. It was such fun, letting it happen, showing this terror of Benjamin as played by the evil James Mason. Life wasn’t serious, nothing had complications, it was all a stage and this a play.

She reached down and took both his hands in hers, pulling them up against her so that he would know without question she was a woman who needed him. She turned — only her head, making sure she would stay in-frame because at this point it would be a tight shot just on her — and looked toward the house. “They’re down there, down that alley, planning the whole thing out.” She turned back to him, not too fast, medium tempo. There would be a cut here to a two-shot favoring him, she would be in profile.

And he wasn’t bad, considering. He had an expectant look, not knowing what was happening but interested, wanting to be part of it. Hell, wanting her, there wasn’t any doubt about that.

“I’ve got to get out of here, darling. It’s all too complicated, I can’t explain now,” speaking quickly, the danger so close, right down the alley. Benjamin coming to look for her, that would be complicated. She was through with Benjamin, she knew that now. She would close the door on the whole thing, forget about it.

Then a little drop of her head, not too much, she let her shoulders fall. She knew how helpless she would look in the dailies, how well she was selling it. “You’ve got to trust me.” She looked up into his eyes. “Somehow, for some crazy reason, destiny has brought us together and you’re the only one who can save me.”

He had a little smile on his face. “Anything. You name it.” Well, it wasn’t exactly

great, but it would do.

“To the ends of the earth?” A real clinker, and as she said it, wondering where it came from, she realized how true it was, how she wanted to slip over the far horizon with the sun, disappear somewhere to the other side of the world. Oh God, that was it, that was what great acting was, making yourself totally emotionally available. She was a terrific actress, she was so talented. How had she ever doubted herself?

“To the ends of the earth.” He kind of stammered it. He was wonderful!

“Oh, darling!” she let her eyes melt into his. She loved calling him darling, she could see the effect it had on him. “We have to hurry!”

He scrambled to his feet, took her purse and shoes, helped her up.

“My car’s down here.”

As they started down the boardwalk she wrapped both her arms around one of his, sheltering herself against him, feeling the tweed against her cheek. He would love her, this good, strong man. He would fall madly, hopelessly in love with her. He was halfway there already.

She looked out at the western sky where full night had fallen. Yes, she needed to move on. Forget the sullied past, not remember a thing about it.

“Are you a professor, darling?” Maybe she would marry him, this clean-cut man. Get out of the business, shit-can all this craziness. She could be a wonderful professor’s wife. Not a complete bitch like Elizabeth Taylor in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* She would be a flawless little academic hostess at those afternoon teas, beautiful, sexy, bright, charming, everything a professor could want. She had the perfect dress hanging in her closet, a floral print with deep décolletage. She would bend down to serve those little sandwiches with the crusts cut off and the grey-haired scholarly roués would pause in their brilliant conversation

to peer down the front, trying to catch a glimpse. She chuckled. He had said something in answer but she missed it.

They turned off the boardwalk, away from the vista of beach and ocean, down a dimly-lit narrow street, cars tight along both curbs, buildings crowded close. She wondered if he really was a professor. It didn't matter. He was taking her away from all this to a place where she could be someone new and different and better.

He kicked a fast food wrapper out of the way, guided her around a pile of dog turds in the middle of the sidewalk. Jesus, the world was filled with such assholes.

Her professor. She would have such fun with him! Of course, chances are it wouldn't last. Nothing had 'til now. But they would have a great time together and it always seemed as if it would go on and on forever, especially at first.

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Note: "Naughty Girl" lyric, rights not obtained, probably in the public domain. Taken from "A Greek Slave," a musical comedy in two acts, libretto by Owen Hall, lyrics by Harry Greenbank and Adrian Ross, music by Sidney Jones, additional numbers by Lionel Monckton, produced by George Edwardes at Daly's Theatre, London June 8, 1898 for a run of 349 performances, closing June 2, 1899.