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Foto Finish  
by John Argo  
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Mystery/Crime

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A year ago, the priceless antique roadster with the gold ashtrays crashed through a guard rail on Ocean Bluffs Road. It exploded in a fireball on the moonlit beach boulders three hundred feet below, killing a woman with whom half the world's men were in love -- including me -- but don't tell Sandy that.

The car probably turned end over end several times, full speed. Nobody will ever know, because nobody saw the accident, and damn sure nobody walked away from it. Or did they? And then there is the huge bribe I was offered when I got near the truth. But first things first.

I drove to Loma Portal and parked my dented VW on a hill overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The reddish golden sunset looked like a lady's drink and the air was balmy as I walked several houses down to Grimacher's steel and glass villa.

I like these huge death insurance claim cases. I've saved Continental Mogul big wads of money several times in the past, and they pay me well. I work a few weeks til burnout; then I spent months surfing and relaxing, maybe travel to Mexico and sip Corona Extras by the Sea of Cortez. This case was different. I'd been in love with the woman, though I'd never met her. Millions of men were. She was, after all, Liana, a tawny, slender angel with long gunmetal black hair, and sultry jungle eyes that bored into a man's soul looking for his primeval solar core. That's how one of her obits read. When I first saw the papers, my fingers trembled and my heart grew faint. The fact that she appeared to have been a San Diego girl added something. She'd had that near-athletic robustness, yet that childlike simplicity, shyness, vulnerability. The world had mourned her passing at the tender age of 30. She was the Marilyn Monroe of our age, our Eva Peron, our Jackie Kennedy. She was Liana. That I should put her last echo to rest in the form of an insurance claim was a morbid honor; I could be a footnote in her biography, not that I thought the publicity would be healthy for me. In the end, I would opt for privacy. And a large sum of cash.

I pressed the door bell, and somewhere a chime rang. A maid opened a carved oak door worth more than my car. She showed me through carpeted corridors to a livingroom whose huge window overlooked the Pacific Ocean. There were sails in the surf, but already the glow had lost its fizz.

Harry Grimacher, shaking my hand, looked surprised. "I thought we had this all behind us." He was a middle-aged man with a paunch. He had a face lined with character, but veiled suspicion in his eyes.

"Just a followup. Some final details," I told him as he eyed me up and

down. I'm a fairly big guy, six two, 220, who used to play halfback for UC San Tomas, and I still look like I just got into my three-piece suit for the first time. Actually, it's probably the thousandth time, since it's my only suit. I'm forty, and about all I really know how to do well is surf. Not a way to get rich, so I welcome these freelance jobs.

"Drink?" Grimacher asked, evening shadows in his features.

"Milk," I suggested. Grimacher raised an eyebrow, and the carpet whispered as a hovering someone rushed off to fill my request. "Now Mr. Grimacher," I said steepling my fingers while we sat on opposite couches, "I'm just going around to cross a few last t's and dot some i's. Thanks," I added as the maid brought milk. "You were Liana's agent." I opened the file in my lap.

"We long ago established that fact," he said, looking at a jeweled watch.

"I won't keep you," I said. "It's been a year since Liana and Paul were killed. The estate has been settled, probate is closed, and Continental Mogul International is about to pay up. Five million bucks, I believe."

"Something like that. Before the lawyers take their cuts."

"All right, let's make sure no salient facts have changed before C.M.I. shells out. Now I notice here that the issue of Paul's social security I.D. was never resolved. Can you shed any new light on that?"

He shook his head and sat in the window frame with his drink. "No, as I've told you people so many times, Paul Conlon showed up one day in L.A. with pictures of the most exquisite model I'd seen in years. That was Liana, no last name. Within a year, I had her on top of the modeling heap. Her picture was on one or two major magazine covers every month. She had her own lines of luggage, perfume, and women's clothing. The Jungle Woman, we styled her, we the agents, the press, the industry. Even got her involved in the Amazon ecology movement. The President and First Lady practically adopted her. She spoke for orphans, whether they were slum children or lost whales." Grimacher's face had a melancholy tinge. "Believe me, Mr. Lambert, she was worth a lot more to me alive than dead. As to Paul Conlon and his social security number, I could care less."

"Formalities." I flicked through my file. "Liana," I said, "Liana. Hmm. That's a stage name, right? A liana is a jungle vine, right? Oh here it is, Maria Esquivel; that's who the bank deposits were made out to."

"Yes," Harry admitted. "She may have come into the country illegally. I never delved into that, and the INS was never able to confirm or deny it."

My scalp tingled with disbelief. "And this Paul Conlon, the photographer who discovered her, he came from nowhere and died a nonentity?"

"I repeat," Harry said, "I wasn't interested in Conlon. Actually, I disliked the guy so I never really got to know him."

"But she was in love with him?"

"They lived together."

I closed the file. "Okay, Mr. Grimacher, thanks for your time."

"Will this be the end of questions?"

"I'll let you know."

Driving away that evening, I felt not in control of this piece of work. As I struggled among headlights and taillights that balmy evening, I knew that C.M.I. was anxious to get signatures on its out of court settlement. And I would have gladly moved the paperwork through my humble shred of officialdom, except for one thing. I had been a fan of Liana, and her death saddened me, though I had never met her. America had lost both a girl next door and a rare beauty. It had made me aware of mortality. Inching along in smoggy traffic among neon signs, while a light sea fog began to creep around street corners, I wasn't taking this assignment lightly. I was slated for 24 hours on per diem, and I meant to use the full three days.

I took I-5 North to La Jolla. There, at the old estate on Torrey Pines Road high above the ocean, I showed the security guard my I.D. and slipped him a five. Then I nosed around the property, which emanated decay. The place

where they'd had so many glamorous parties stood empty. As the fog rolled in, I tiptoed across a redwood deck whose boards creaked dangerously. There was a lot of algae slime in the delft-checked jacuzzi. It was a place of creaks and whispers, of drips and echoes; a more hysterical person might have argued there were ghosts moving around at night. Stuff like that doesn't get to me; but I'm a sucker for nostalgia, and I remembered Liana's crisp smile on TV. I steeped in melancholy until soggy, then walked back to my car.

I drove to the fatal spot on Ocean Bluffs. The guard rail had long been repaired, and warning signs were in place. The fog shouldered in protectively, and I could get no glimpse of the deadly wet rocks so far below.

It had been a year since their deaths, since tabloids and staid newspapers alike had had their romp. Arabian princes, Japanese billionaires, Italian bankers, you name it, had propositioned and chased Liana, but she had remained true to that enigmatic thin man with troubled eyes, Paul Conlon, who had the drug plastered gaze of a rock star. It was rumored that they fought often, that she ran out on him, that he ran out on her. He had his own subset of paparazzi who chased after him when he was with starlets at Cannes and Monte Carlo. Liana was seen one day with a young Adonis on Crete, another day with a major producer in Los Angeles. Liana and Paul always ended up back together.

I stopped at a fast food place, ordered a large cola, and washed down several amphetamines. I meant to get the most of the next three days, and sleep was not part of the agenda. That night I let myself into the main C.M.I. office. I sipped sugar water, sitting in an island of sixty watt light at a wooden desk, and pored over stuffed file folders, some with photos. I found a loose photo that had no label, evidently thrown into the file. It was a sun-washed snapshot of a young hispanic woman in a bikini, with one foot up on the bumper of a classic dark tan roadster. She vaguely resembled Liana, and I wondered if it were a sister or cousin. The photo was signed in a big scrawl: "Ana Love You Maria." I stuffed the photo into my shirt pocket (who was Anna?) and began to work on the file, initialing things, checking things.

In the morning (coffee, another pill) I called Harry Grimacher. "Who is Anna, Harry?"

Harry said in a low voice, like someone carefully pouring medicine: "She is a sister of Liana."

"Of Maria, you mean." A rectangle of morning sunlight fell on the photo, where she smiled with careless affection in the lights and shadows of some earlier day. Dust motes whirled. From dust to dust, I thought, and somewhere inside my universe there exploded a tiny galaxy of grief. I forgot Harry.

"She was special," he said gruffly in my ear, and I nearly dropped the phone. He emitted a long sigh that was half wheeze, and I could hear his heavy hand rasping over his unshaven face. "Oh yes," he said wearily, "Conlon had to go far to find her. I believe she came out of the jungle, though people have said her accent was straight Tijuana. She was sweet, and innocent, and we all tore her up. The Business tore her up."

With my fingertip I traced the shadow lines defining her cheek bone, her nose, her forehead. The photo was slightly grainy, and totally uncomposed, but even there her personality shone through. Yes, I was beginning to be sure the girl in the photo was Liana.

"I never liked that bastard Conlon," Harry said. "He had some spell over her that nobody could figure out. She was fragile, you know. Self-esteem. She'd try to go out on her own, and the world would chew her up, the Business would do a number on her, and before long she'd be back with Conlon. It was kind of like he'd put her back together again."

I interrupted: "Did Conlon own a roadster?"

Harry laughed after a moment's reflection. "How the hell do I know? I told you, I wasn't Conlon's agent, much less was I interested in what he drove."

"Thanks, Harry," I said. We rang off cordially, almost like old

friends. I went back to the files, trying to get done with the tedious stuff so I'd have some time left. I'd never met Liana, but maybe I'd get to meet her sister just once, probably a pale imitation. The address was in the file. Investigators had already been there during the previous year.

Boy was I in for a shock. Anna Doyle was totally unlike her sister, which made me completely sure about the photo. I found the DoYLES in an alley apartment along the edges of Barrio Logan. It was one of those aging places where the yard is muddy and stinks of decay whenever it rains. They had a view of telephone poles, Coronado Bridge pylons scrawled with gang graffiti, and gray Navy ships. A burly man answered my knock. "What is it?" I was surprised he didn't slam the door in my face as I explained. "One more go-round," he said walking away from the open door, which I took as an invitation to enter.

Inside it smelled of dogs, old couches, cat food, and cigarette ashes. In the gloom, a TV flickered. Yellowed drapes were drawn, and a section of dark paneling leaned loosely.. The floor creaked when we walked; in places it did not creak, but made a soggy give under my feet. An enormous young woman sat in the love seat, eating popcorn and watching a game show. She ignored me. I saw the Esquivel resemblance in her nose, a small wide one that had looked cute and girlish on Liana, but looked like a button with two threadholes on Anna's face.

The angry man shook my hand and had me sit. I took a plastic-cushioned kitchen chair, hoping nothing lived inside of it. "What is it this time?" he asked. He had a reddish beard with a speck of food trapped in its edge. His baggy khaki pants, his tank top, his white socks and torn slippers, all had stains in them. He'd seen a dozen of me come and go since his sister-in-law's death. I explained as briefly as I could that it was just a formality, the payoff was just around the corner, I was just checking one last time to see if all material facts were still the same.

"They are," he said, sucking in his lower lip and jutting his chin beard at me. He grabbed my sleeve and whispered: "When do the checks start coming?"

"Soon, I'm sure."

"That's good." He lit a cigarette. "The fucking roof leaks, and with a kid on the way I gotta do something."

I had hoped to get to shake Anna's hand or something, but when we yawed and pitched across the deck into the livingroom, Anna rose up, her Hawaiian mumu fluffing like a parachute. She squalled broken-heartedly, holding tiny white hands over her moon face.

"She's still taking it hard," Doyle rasped in a cloud of smoke. "That's why I wish you fucking people would quit jerking us around and cough up the money."

Afterward, I bought a quart of orange juice at a boarded up corner market that looked like Lotto in Beirut. Popping two more pills, washing them down with juice, I headed back to the office. Everyone was gone for the day. I had the place to myself, and listened to quiet jazz. I watched through dirty windows as candy lights moved in the harbor.

From time to time I've shared my life with one or another lady who appreciated a surfer. This wasn't one of those times, so I was free to work night and day if I chose. After midnight, I sat back, rubbed my eyes, took another pill, washed it down with the last of the OJ, and stared at the photo lying in a pool of yellow desk light. My heart was racing, from lack of sleep and too many pills. Someone's girlish bikini-clad figure smiled mysteriously, innocently, on some happier day past. I almost thought she was trying to tell me something.

I sat up. Someone had taken that snapshot, and she was looking at him. I wished someone like her would look at me that way. I cupped the snapshot in both hands and stared. With one hand, I fumbled in the desk drawer and brought out a magnifying glass. I pored over the snapshot, trying to draw an ounce of sense from her smile. I moved slowly down along the tanned shoulders, noted the sparse breasts, the long thin torso, the girlish legs. As I gazed into

that lost day, I picked up the phone and dialed. Somewhere a sleepy voice answered.

"Sandy," I said.

She groaned in her pillow. "It had to be you, Lambert."

"Sorry. Hey, can you help me out?"

"Go 'way."

Sandy Jensen was an old friend of mine. A young friend. I'd given her surfing lessons. "Sandy, what's it worth to you? How about dinner at Mr. A's?"

"It's Oh-Dark-Thirty."

"This is special, Sandy, I swear."

"What is it this time, Seth?"

I rubbed my hands together. Sandy was with the California Highway Patrol. "I need a make on a dark tan roadster classic, California License." I read her the number.

"Gimme a few minutes."

I sat tight. What she was going to do was illegal, but then so were lots of things. Like fraud, for example.

She called back in a half hour. "This better be good, Seth."

"Dinner like I promised, plus ten surfing lessons. What the hell happened to you?"

"I started going out with a stock broker."

"That was six months ago."

"I know. I'm sorry. He turned out to be an asshole."

"He was married, huh?"

"How did you guess?"

"Who owns the roadster?"

"A Doyle, John." She gave me the address, and I must confess I was a little surprised. It wasn't the place I'd been today. "Social Security Number?"

"You're pushing, Seth."

"It's important. You'll love it when I tell you the story."

Well, I did tell her the story after I got it all pieced together, when Sandy and I were securely fixed into a seat at Mr. A's in Mission Valley. That was a few days later. The night I got Sandy out of bed, though, I hadn't quite stumbled on the secret of Ocean Bluffs Road yet.

John Doyle, of an address in Chula Vista, was the registered owner of the roadster in the photo. I drove down there the next day, and found myself sitting in a rather prim Catholic living room in the old part of town. The lady pouring coffee and smoking cigarettes opposite me was smallish, heavyish, grayish, and angryish. Not the kind of anger that flares, but the kind that's a long slow burn, that shines out of the eyes heavy with hurt. "I gave him my best years," she said, pouring. The coffee smelled good. I palmed two benzedyl; coffee was about all I could stomach. Her smoke was making me dizzy. "I don't call him a son-a-bitch. I don't call him nothing. He was a good father to our three kids. He was a good husband, I thought, only what did I know was going on in that fat head of his?"

I didn't bother asking what happened. It's the oldest story in the world. Instead, I showed her the photo. She didn't flinch as she looked down one side of her face without moving her head or finding an expression. "Is this the girl?" she asked, and it was clear she'd never seen the woman her husband had run off with.

"Her sister," I said.

She stared at her adversary's sister and I couldn't figure what went on in her mind.

"How did the girl get on his car?" I asked.

She poured more coffee. "She climbed? He put her there? How do I know, Mr. Lambert?"

"Seth." I sipped the scalding brew. She was alone in the empty nest, and the big eagle had flown. The lady gave good coffee. I thought of the fat couple waiting for their money and shuddered. "Mrs. Doyle, your husband went

and married the sister of the girl in the picture, Did you have any indication beforehand?" What I meant to find out was if she'd ever met Liana.

Before I could hone my question, she jumped in: "Mr. Lambert, John was always a bit different. Worked in the tire business for twenty years, but he was a frustrated artist. I suppose I should have known he was getting edgy. I never actually saw him looking after other women, but he became rather distant. And then!"

"Then?"

"Then, Mr. Lambert, he was having conversations with the Holy Ghost."

"Oh really?"

"Well, that's what he told me." She put more sugar in her coffee.

"That's when I knew my John was not entirely balanced."

"So he was a religious person, huh?" I was starting to get bored. "What exactly did he talk with the Holy Ghost about, Mrs. Doyle, do you know?"

She waved her hand. "Oh, just nonsense. The Holy Ghost told him to take up photography, for one thing."

I was interested again. "Photography, Mrs. Doyle? And did he?"

"Oh yes. He spent our Christmas money on a camera and a tripod and who knows what else. That was nearly three years ago, right before he left me. And then he took up with some enormous Mexican girl he met at a church bingo, right under my nose." She snickered. "Can you imagine? I was slim as a reed when we married. He always told me I was slim as a reed. And then he goes and..."

"Thank you, Mrs. Doyle. I'll call you if I need anything more."

I stopped at my apartment, a cozy little second floor walkup in Mission Beach, where the ocean was a flint-colored curve in the sky. I made coffee and checked my calls. I longed to lie down on my cot by the picture window. I longed for a storm to roll in and batter the honey-paneled walls. I longed for someone like Liana to come and lie beside me. I longed for a lot. But I popped a few more pills and kept moving. My heart trembled like a scared mouse.

Okay, what I got? I got four lives: Maria, Anna, Paul Conlon, John Doyle. So far I've managed to trace one of them back, and that's Doyle. What about Anna and Maria-Liana Esquivel? I made a few phone calls. The parish was easy. There were a few Esquivels, but only one family with an Anna and a Maria. Within two hours I was in San Ysidro, where the last dusty boulevard in the USA points down into Mexico. There, during a sunset as hushed as a late Sunday afternoon, I met their mother, Maria Esquivel, in her living room. She was about fifty and looked seventy. I wondered who put such a severe shine on the floor that the sunshine seemed to sink into the amber wood. She had no teeth, but was not afraid to grin. She was one of those people who grin when they don't know something. This woman was constantly grinning. "Your daughter is Maria?" She grinned. "Your daughter is Anna?" She grinned. "Daughter," I said, raising my voice as though she were deaf. "Er, \_hija."\_

Her grin went away, replaced by lynx intelligence. "\_Ah, hija,"\_ she said. "\_Si, yo tiene dos hijas, Anna y Maria. Pero..."\_

"Aw Jesus," I said, "stop please." I'm ashamed of my lack of languages. How can an American live next door to one of the world's largest countries and not speak the lingo? But then her English wasn't fit to sneeze into a spittoon. She counted something (her children, I think) on all fingers; when she reached ten, she borrowed another handful of fingers from herself. She showed me the shrine of photos on her living room table. Nice big family. Lots of well-mannered looking boys and girls. "\_Anna y Maria?"\_ I said. She pointed with a knobby finger. I did a double-take. Anna was no doubt the woman I'd met this morning, several years and kiloweight more mature, but Maria was a wizened looking woman with sickly eyes, black curls, and thick glasses. "\_Maria?"\_ I asked. "\_La pobre pasada?"\_

"\_No no no,"\_ Mrs. Esquivel said. "\_Maria no esta muerte. Esta una..."\_ (nun, I think she said in Spanish). Proudly, she showed me a small stack of letters and cards with Mexican stamps on them. The writer had a cramped, pretty style. This was getting more confusing by the minute. "Does your

husband speak English?" I asked loudly.

"No, no," she said wagging her finger again.

My last try: "Do you know about Mr. Doyle?"

"Quien?" She looked pained.

"\_Senor Doyle. Cognosce...?"\_

She looked horrified. She burst into an avalanche of rolled r's and spattered syllables, and I felt myself being led to the door faster than I'd come in. "\_Bueno,"\_ she kept shouting as though I'd stepped on her toes, "\_buen'."\_

"\_Bueno,"\_ I tried to reply, but it obviously didn't cut the same standard. I couldn't manage to get the same lilt into the middle vowel. The last I saw of her before the door slammed was a wagging finger.

At the gate, I emptied about two pounds of junk mail and letters from the mail box, and started back up the walk. I rifled through the pile. Sure enough, there was a red envelope, card-type, from Anna. Wait a minute. Ana Maria Doyle. To Mrs. Maria Esquivel. What kind of shell game were these people playing with their names? I was about to knock on the door when I heard the old lady on the phone. "Yeah, Victor," she was saying, "some big dumb tin horn was just here asking more of them stupid questions. I think he said this is the last time..."

I slipped the mail quietly back into the mailbox, and drove off as quickly as I could. On I-5 headed north, I pulled out the piece of junk mail I'd stuck in my pocket. I shook it, and out fell the red envelope. I couldn't wait to see. I pulled over on the freeway shoulder and laid the envelope and the photo side by side. Sure enough, the handwriting matched. Same careless, expansive scrawl. Now my heart was really thumping. I was onto something that the investigators from C.M.I. had missed entirely.

I popped a few more pills and did a little more checking. Sure enough, all the facts pointed toward the same trail. John Doyle had enrolled in a fitness club in Chula Vista three years ago, weighing three hundred pounds. Ana Maria Esquivel? Yes, same club, and she'd weighed two fifty; height? five three. Not bad, Seth, I thought. I got Harry Grimacher on the phone. "Harry," I said, "think back when you first met Paul Conlon. Was he driving a dark tan roadster?"

Harry chuckled. "Yeah, I'd nearly forgotten. It came back to me after we talked. Sure, he had HER in it, and she and the car were like a poem together. I envied him."

"You hated him," I said.

He laughed, like someone who knows it doesn't matter any more. "Okay, I envied and hated him. I wanted to take her from him."

"And you did. You did, Harry. Come on, I read it all in the papers. What does Movie Times know that you don't? You had an affair with her, and so did a dozen other guys."

"It's true," he said gently. "She was like a child."

"Yeah," I said, "well now she's like a house."

The edge was back in his voice. "You'd better come up and see me," Harry said.

I did. On the way, I stopped in the barrio and peeked into John Doyle's yard. There, on blocks, under sheets of crumbling black plastic held down by cinderblocks, was the dark tan roadster.

The next evening, the maitre d' led me and Sandy to a seat overlooking San Diego Harbor. I was a little woozy on my feet, but Sandy in her gauzy white dress was one you wanted to keep following no matter how woozy you got. The place smelled of roast beef and oozed jazz. A fountain pattered. Did I mention the aroma of the house wine, a brothy Napa burgundy, and its wimpy cousin, the Napa Rose? We ordered drinks. Sandy ordered "Orange juice!"

"My stomach," I said.

She slapped her hands together. "Now about this story you promised me. After getting me up in the middle of the night and not inviting me over. This

better be good, Seth Lambert." She had her shoes off and one toe strayed behind my kneecap under the table. Sandy was the kind of trim athletic girl you saw in beer commercials. When Sandy turned her head, her profile was sharp enough to cut paper. People stared enviously. I told her about my unexpected three-day case.

"How exciting," Sandy said. She glowed, reflecting candle light.

"What's the skinny?"

I leaned forward, folded my hands over her dear freckled ones, and lied: "I have no proof, but I think it was a double suicide."

A bit of the smile vanished. She tried to hide her disappointment.

"Yes, I read something like that."

Moments later, she said: "Here comes the soup."

I wondered, after three days of popping pills, what it would be like to eat again. The soup was liquid and would go down, I thought, and stay down. I was wrong.

When I woke up it was dark. I could see right away I was in my bed in my apartment. I sat up on one elbow and looked outside. The ocean was covered with white caps as far as I could see. "Brr," someone said. I looked the other way. It was Sandy, wearing nothing but a kind of lacy thong that glowed like a tooth in the dark. Her lithe body flitted through the room and she flowed into the bed with me. I gasped as her freezing feet pried my calves apart. She stilled me with hot damp kisses still vaguely tinged with Napa rose.

"What happened?" I asked.

She pressed me back and bit my nipple. "When I saw your eyes in the candle light, I knew you were on pills. I tried to get you out in one piece, but we were waiting for a doggie bag, and you got up. That was when you first started to throw up, and you were kind enough to make it to the door. You lugged down the front steps in a trail of barf. I got you here, cleaned you up, and put you to bed."

I embraced her with genuine affection. "Sandy, you are the most beautiful woman in the world."

"Oh yeah," she guffawed. But she believed me, and I was pleased because I meant it. And it was true. I had learned my lesson about truth and beauty, and intended never to forget it.

Of course I could never tell her or anyone else the truth, for example about my last meeting with Harry Grimacher. My conversation with Harry had been short and to the point. I was to turn in a clean report and walk away with a quarter million dollars in smallish bills. He had the cash ready and waiting when I got to the house. It was all the conversation we needed. I signed a receipt; that way we all had each other by the balls, and nobody could rat.

But there was the whatever you want to call it, the love thing, the infatuation. I stopped by Doyle's. He was surprised when I told him, but relieved that Harry and I had it all settled and there'd be no further inquiries. I didn't really want to greet Ana Maria Liana Esquivel in person. It was enough that I saw her lumbering from the living room to the kitchen during a commercial, then back to the livingroom with another quart of ice cream.

John Paul Doyle (the Conlons had been his adoptive parents) took me in the yard, under the moonlight, where he could smoke. He offered, but I declined; I was still slamming along on pills at that point, and the thought of another strong drug made my system want to crash. "You want to know why," he said without asking. "I'm sure you do. I don't blame you. And nobody else will ever know. Well, I was unhappily married, you know, the itch hit, and I desired someone young and passionate. Then one day the answer came. In church. I tried to explain to my wife, but she never understood anything. I'd always wanted to be an artist, and I had talent, but we married early and had kids, so I never had time to draw or paint. I was daydreaming in church, looking at a young woman across the aisle while the organ music played and the choir sang. In the midst of all that purity, I was having this erotic daydream, and



it struck me that I could bring it all together by learning photography. Somehow, I could fall in love with an image, capture it, possess it. So I got into cameras. My wife didn't understand. We split up. I tried the singles scene, but I was too sensitive and people really chew you up when you open your heart to them. Then I met that young woman again. Her." He pointed over his shoulder, speaking in a whisper, just as Liana made another trip past, perhaps for some pate or a nice cheesecake. "I was no stud either, Lambert. But I saw the beauty in her face. We reached for the stars together. She gave herself to me, this girl, this woman who had so much love, but no self-confidence. I was her self-confidence, Lambert, I still am."

"That's why you two kept going back together," I said.

"Sure," he said. "We lost a lot of weight, got into shape. Do you know how I felt the first time a woman propositioned me? I was speechless, and she said 'of course I don't really fit in with YOU people...?' Lambert, it was a new world for Ana and me."

I showed him the photo. He looked at it fondly but didn't want to touch it. "Yeah, that's Liana. We will always treasure that short little time. Like having paradise and losing it."

I filled in: "So you invented new identities."

"Borrowed," he corrected. "Conlon, after my adoptive parents. In her case, she was really Ana Maria, but she took a sister's name..."

"A nun in Mexico."

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"There were over a dozen children, among them an Anna, a Maria, and an Ana Maria."

"That's right. She took the stage name Liana to further hide things."

"A jungle vine."

"Right. And then as you know we were out of control. We were famous and wealthy and beautiful, but we were miserable. I was drinking too much, and she was beginning to eat again. The end was in sight. A month or two longer, and we would have been tabloid food, big blobs."

I said: "So you took the quick way out. A phony suicide." He nodded. I knew the rest. The agent, Harry Grimacher, had arranged the insurance scam. To really fake their deaths, they had to leave all their possessions untouched. Only her parents knew, the toothless lady I'd spoken with and her husband she'd called right after my visit. None of her other relatives had known that their obese Ana Maria had been the same as the famous, luscious Liana. Harry had set them up in their barrio hideaway. Harry had rolled her Jaguar off the cliff and Doyle had driven Harry home in his roadster. Within months, Doyle and his woman were unrecognizable. A scheme like this will work if all the right people are paid off. In this case, they have been.

"How did you get onto us?" Doyle asked.

I waved the photo. "Lots of little things. But the clincher was, the handwriting on the photo matches that of a card your girlfriend sent her mother. I finally figured it out. The autograph wasn't from Maria to Anna. It was from Ana Maria to Maria, who is a nun and probably never got a picture of her sister in the bikini. The photo ended up in our files."

Doyle and I had said goodnight, and goodbye.

Now, alone with Sandy, while the window rattled and whitecaps rolled on the sea, I had other business. "Sandy, honey..."

"Whoa, honey," she said, but I'd never spoken with her like this, and she was all eyes and ears, totally mine, still glowing this time not with candlelight but with that inner pleasure.

"Honey," I said, "you may not realize it, but a guy like me can save up a real nest egg for a rainy day, and then maybe he meets someone like you."

"How much?" Sandy asked, merely curious.

"Enough."

"You're too much," she said, banging me over the head with a pillow. But we made earnest love that night.

Next day was cold and gray, the windy kind of day surfers like. We were

out in our wetsuits, turning corners on the twelve footers coming in from the Orient. We were just far enough apart to be out of shouting distance. Sandy yelled something, and I cupped my ears but could not hear.

A minute later when we were on the shore, we stuck our boards in the sand and decided to walk arm in arm up to the cabana for some hot coffee. "What were you shouting out there?" I asked when we were back out on the sand looking at the sea.

She put her hand to her mouth, stood on tiptoes, and whispered into my ear: "The stockbroker was a dumb mistake. Sorry."

We stood arm in arm, holding our cups, watching the waves rolling in and the pennants snapping and the guys paddling out to catch the next wave.

I patted her arm lightly. "It's okay, we all do the best we can."

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