

Judy Strick...Living on the Fault Line...Tales from L.A.



Story № 9

Kafka-esque

Hollywood Hills

My name is Ramona Parker. I must confess to finding myself in a very strange, and rather grotesque, situation. I am afraid of my house; kind of an inverse agoraphobia.

Allow me to elaborate. Up until now I've been quite happy in my little 1920s bungalow, in the flats of Hollywood, not far from the shabby resplendence of Hollywood Blvd. I've lived here for seventeen years with my passing parade of beloved rescue dogs, and transient lovers; all of whom seem to have too short a lifespan. At the moment I'm between lovers; I am

never between dogs. I now live with two small fuzzy mutts whom I love in a slightly neurotic and excessive way. Their company keeps me quite satisfied, as does good friends, noncommittal sex, movies, and my work. I have been a positive person, content with my life and my ability to live it on my own terms. You see, my house has been supporting me quite nicely.

I bought this place fourteen years ago, when I was twenty-seven. I'd inherited money from my parents who had died in a head on collision on the I-5 a year earlier. I mention this casually because I cannot bear to talk about it, much less think about it. The full horror of that event is 99% repressed; but every once in a while, the 1% sneaks out and renders me mindless; and I remember that I am living in a house I bought with blood money. Some thoughts are pointless. They change nothing and make you feel horrible.

I had not followed my parents' advice to invest my money in safe stocks and bonds. I put every last cent of it in property -- my house. I was mortgage free. I continued to work at a job that I loathed in order to pay the bills. Mortgage or no mortgage, one needs to eat. And artists don't have a lot of options work wise. I was lucky to have a steady job even if it meant I was a hamster on a treadmill in a cage.

And then the real estate market went crazy in 2005, and I re-financed the hell out of the place. My bank practically begged me to take out a home equity line of credit with an adjustable rate of interest; which I did. It was like dipping into a big fat honey jar. All I had to do was pay back the interest on however much money I borrowed; until sometime in the seemingly distant

future, when the loan would reset and interest rates would go up, and I would have to start paying back the capital, blah, blah, blah... I was sure I would be able to deal with that when the time, which was coming, came. The home equity loan money has allowed me to quit my hideous dead-end job, in the bleak misery of downtown industrial L.A. Thanks to the B of A, I've been able to finance my career as a painter of large photo realist abstractions -- I know that sounds like a contradiction in terms, but it works. I'm able to slip in and out of reality quite seamlessly I have discovered. I have had shows and I go to art openings, and am part of the scene. I make very little money as an artist, but I no longer live paycheck-to-paycheck, designing cute animals wearing clothes. No more cows in aprons. My own cow provides. You see, when it comes to finances, I consider myself a Maasai tribesman. The Maasai have a practice of bleeding the family cow, in order to make a nice soup out of the cow's blood, which they harvest by making a small incision in the animal's neck. The bloodletting doesn't hurt the cow in the least. She gets to live a long and respected life without winding up as a steak dinner for the village; a win-win situation for all concerned. Seemed like a great idea to me. So I bleed my house by writing myself a check when needed, and I have managed to live quite decently on the proceeds. It never occurred to me to question what would happen when the cow finally died.

Okay, so that's a little background for you. Let me bring you into the now, and explain why I am afraid of my own beloved house, the very basis of my freedom. Why I'm in a heightened state of terror every time I switch on the kitchen light. Let's go back...

Five nights ago I returned from an opening in Chinatown; a performance artist was doing his performance thing. The gallery was down the street from a homeless encampment, which I had to pass to get to my chic arty event. It was somewhat scary. A fire was burning in a garbage can. A scrawny pit bull on a chain started barking at me. The homeless people in sleeping bags, and makeshift tents, with shopping carts full of god knows what paid me no mind. They did not want to see me, any more than I wanted to see them. There but for the Grace of God, blah, blah, blah... The gallery was crowded: arty poseurs, dark clad students with tattoos and pierces, uber cool women in cargo pants and diamonds, rich investment bankers and lawyers trying to look hip. The performers were naked whiteface mimes who did awkward dances to the music of Kraftwerk, interspersed by readings of Goethe. After the performance, over the cheap wine and stale pretzels, I ran into an old lover, Peter, who paints huge all black canvases and makes a living teaching hopeful art students at L.A. City College, all of whom, statistically speaking, are doomed to failure as artists. In the year we were together the man was a cokehead and a wonderful lover, when he wasn't too loaded to concentrate. But outside the bedroom, he was a pedantic, self-involved asshole; not nearly as interesting as any of my dogs I know I'm sounding a bit mean-spirited. I'm usually not a bitch. Really! Peter had invited himself back to my house that night. I should have let him come with me. He could have dealt with the situation in a manly way

Okay, the HOUSE. As you might have noticed, I've been dancing around the subject because it really is quite unpleasant. And I always find it difficult to

face unpleasantness, like old boyfriends and adjustable rate loans and my parents untimely end.

Anyway, I came home tired and slightly buzzed from the cheap white wine they were pouring at the performance. My dogs, yapping and squealing in delight, came running over to greet me. Pinkie, who has a pink nose, was jumping joyously with the perennial enthusiasm of a two-year old toddler. Tallulah cringed in greeting, as is her style. She had been abused before I adopted her and has never stopped being terrified of brooms or outstretched hands. She's kind of a nutty animal; but I love her all the more for her having suffered. I do admit to being a hopeless romantic about creatures great and small. Most creatures -- humans excluded.

So I greeted my dogs, and walked into the kitchen to shut off the lights, which I always leave on when I'm gone. There are robberies in my neighborhood. There are robberies everywhere. The city is full of robbers. I count on my dogs to be my alarm system. They're good, if sometimes annoying, barkers. The dogs followed me, sycophantically waiting for their evening treat. As I reached for the box of gourmet organic dog biscuits, I noticed, from the corner of my eye, a HUGE black insectoid-thing running erratically across the bare wood of my kitchen floor, crazily skittering around like an out of control rabid ZuZu pet! I could not believe the size of the fucker- it was like a horror movie. For a moment I was thought I was hallucinating- perhaps I'd had too much cheap chardonnay. Maybe it was a mouse -- a black mouse. But it ran like a bug. Its course was unpredictable -- it seemed

to be running away from me but it could turn in a nanosecond and run right up my leg. Furthermore it was shiny, and had many legs, and it was faster than the wind as only a bug can be fast. It was the biggest goddamn beetle-bug-whatever, I'd ever seen, outside of a National Geographic magazine. I screamed for my dogs and assumed they would deal with it -- the same dogs who go terrier-crazy when any small furry wild thing appears in the back yard. The same dogs who chase butterflies bees and wasps relentlessly. These dogs were having none of this nightmare though. They stared, nervously immobile, at the huge monstrous insect as it buzzed and scuttled around the kitchen floor fast as lightning. It was so damn big that I swear I could hear its feet hitting the wood floor. Now I am someone who does not like to kill living things. I catch spiders and crickets and June bugs in a jar and put them outside; but of course in this case it was irrelevant. The bastard was too big to kill with anything but a long handled ax. I ran to my broom closet and got out my broom holding it like a light saber, ready to take on the Darth Vader of the insect world, ready to chase it out the door into my backyard where it could vanish among the wild things. And then the damn thing disappeared before I had a chance to open the door. Holy Jesus! The son-of-a-bitch had vanished in my kitchen, and was now hiding in some crevasse or behind some appliance, where it was liable to jump out any minute and start its crazy unpredictable running about. It made my skin crawl to think about it

Now I usually sleep with my bedroom door open; I am a bit claustrophobic. But that night I contemplated closing the door and locking it. Unfortunately, this being an old house that had been settling itself for almost a century, the

doorframes are out of whack and there's a huge gap between the door and the floor, large enough to admit one hard-shelled, fast moving, monster-bug. I closed the door and stuck a towel into the crack. The dogs both climbed under the covers with me. They were useless in this type of crisis. I was unable to fall asleep, imagining this great nasty creature- or perhaps its mate, scurrying across my bedroom floor, running up the side of the bed and onto my face. Monstro -- I was beginning to think of the thing by that name. I put the pillow over my head and tried to drift off and most unexpectedly found myself missing Peter. Peter used to take care of bugs; he even dealt with dog poop. There were definitely things about Peter that I missed, aside from the sex. He liked to cook. Sometimes he would come over to the house with a Gelsons bag filled with the makings of a gourmet pasta dinner. Of course I would have to listen to him, over a glass of fine Merlot, talking endlessly about his career, and his artistic vision, and the way he had been screwed over by the poobahs of the art world -- like they even knew who he was. There I go being bitchy. He really doesn't deserve it. He's a decent enough human being. Really.

As I was falling asleep, trying not to think of Monstro skittering about, I thought of my old job, drawing chickens in aprons and geese with baker's toques. It was really a shitty job. The factory was in the seventh ring of downtown L.A. in a wretched old building with a Dickensian business ethic. The art staff shared a workroom with a sink-room in the back, the repository of a big old porcelain sink for the washing of brushes and disposing of paints. A bit of history: a huge cockroach had been living in the sink room for a long time -- it was like a legendary granddaddy fish in an old fishing hole that

nobody had ever been able to catch. Our cockroach evidently thrived on gouache paint and was occasionally found chowing down under the dripping faucet. Every once in a while there would be a scream, and somebody would come running out of the sink-room, having encountered "old faithful.": Until one day, when there was a shriek from back there, and one of the artists came running out cursing her head off- and she was a Jehovah's Witness and they never cuss. But this time was different. A new member of the design staff, named Ori, got up and marched over to the sink with great determination. Ori was a large man from the Philippines, and having grown up in tropical climes was undaunted by big bugs. Everyone held their breath, until we heard a thud, and Ori cheerfully emerged from the room, old granddaddy cockroach squished in his closed fist. The legs were still moving.

I should have had an affair with the unflappable Ori. If he were here now, he'd deal with my monster bug with great efficiency and aplomb. My Monstro was way too big for a human fist, much less a heavy boot. It called for a steamroller. Or an assault rifle which would be a lot easier to get my hands on than a steamroller.

The next morning I dragged myself from my sleepless bed, wary of the bathroom with its enticing water sources. The dreaded Monstro was nowhere to be seen. For a moment I started doubting my own perceptions. Was I imagining the whole thing, mistaking some floater in my eye for a living creature. And then I remembered the way the dogs stared at it. I put on heavy-soled shoes and walked apprehensively toward the kitchen, where the

broom was leaning against the dishwasher, at the ready, should last night's nightmare vision reappear. I looked around everywhere, my hand on the broom handle. No black scuttling shape.

I had my usual breakfast -- a cup of black coffee and a protein bar, and read my newspaper, alert to any unusual sounds. I kept checking the floor. I kept my feet up on the rung of the chair. There was an article in the newspaper about the drought that was killing my redwood tree and my hydrangeas. Could my unwanted visitor be the result of the changing weather patterns that were returning Southern California back to the desert it once had been? I've noticed more spiders this year; more fleas. They say that cockroaches will survive global warming and human apocalypse. The cockroaches will be the ultimate survivors. If there are many species as big as my unwanted visitor, they'll no doubt evolve to dinosaur size. Maybe the world would be a better place if large insects controlled the planet. At least they don't have the need to develop nuclear weapons and plastic and politicians. There's something to be said for that.

After washing off my breakfast dishes while waiting for the thing to pop out of the kitchen drain, I went out to my studio, an old storage shed that I had spent a chunk of home equity money on restoring it into a lovely sky-lighted workplace. My paintings are abstractions, large color saturated canvases with mixed perspectives and random images. My current painting was background washes of blue and green, roses floating over bombed out buildings, fragments of broken glass... a waterfall... I stood before my canvas, staring at

it. Something was missing. I squeezed a small blob of black paint on my encrusted pallet. And before I knew it, I had painted a large black insect, crawling up the left side of canvas. I had not meant to paint the goddamn bug. It came of its own accord, like my uninvited guest.

That evening I turned on the news. There had been a mass murder, in a shopping mall in Minnesota. I watched the endless coverage for a while- the scurrying crowds the distant sounds of shots, the interviews with terrified survivors.

I went back into my studio and painted another beetle on my canvas.

One might say I was becoming obsessed. That night, my sleep was erratic. I pulled the covers over my head, just in case I had an unwanted nighttime visitor. Bugs ran around in my dreams, a swarm of locusts devouring the world. It became too hot under the covers, even for Pinkie.

The next morning, I stealthily tiptoed into my kitchen, wanting to catch Monstro unawares. Back door open and holding onto the broom, I dared to look in the corners, and hidden spaces near the refrigerator and under the sink; all likely hideouts for the many-legged beast. My efforts were useless of course. Perhaps the damn thing was hiding behind the refrigerator, spawning hundreds of eggs that would hatch into larval monsters, to grow unchecked and gradually take over my house. Before the bank did.

The next day I had my breakfast at Starbucks, so I could relax, and forget about my carapaced nemesis and read the newspaper and drink my coffee.

Except who can relax when you read about ISIS terrorists running all over the place, and the country becoming a plutocracy, and people dying all over the Middle East in relentless wars, and a Duck Dynasty mentality taking over the whole fucking USA.

When I went home, I stalked around the place, with my hand on the broom. I realized that I was perhaps getting a little loopy, but all I could think about was that thing hiding somewhere, waiting to jump out.

So I called a couple of exterminators. They all used deadly toxins, and I'd have to wrap everything that was edible, and vacate my house, and it would be expensive; and bad for the animals, and on and on.

And in truth, I was beginning to doubt my own perceptions. I was starting to wonder if the goddamn thing was real, or a figment of my imagination.

I went out to my studio and covered my glowing red canvas with more nasty black bugs.

I dreamed of bugs that night, once again. My world had become a perilous place.

I began doing research on large insects of the world. There are quite a few. Especially in tropical hot climates -- where L.A. seems to be heading. There are twelve-inch long walking stick bugs from Thailand that look like tree branches, and in Southeast Asia there's moth as big as a shitzu. And many huge beetles, bigger than a man's fist: giant burrowing cockroaches from Australia, elephant beetles from Mexico, Goliath bird-eaters from the rain

forests in South America. To say nothing of your every day tarantulas. My *bête noir* was not pictured on any of the sites I checked. Monstro's kind is probably migrating north at this very moment, drawn by the warming temperatures of California; of the entire west coast -- of the world.

Peter used to take out big ugly spiders for me. He was very sweet that way. Maybe time has made him less narcissistic. I shouldn't have blown Peter off the way I did. That goddamn hard-shelled beast has made me lonely. I wish I had somebody in my life with whom to share all the scary shit that's coming down. Someone to cling to when the El Niño comes and floods the city and breeds more massive insects, and the exotic bacteria that will come from the tropical forests, carried by the migrating hideous bugs; like the one that's living, somewhere in my house; waiting to pounce- like rising interest rates, or earthquakes or terrorist attack, or war or floods.. It would be nice to have someone around when my fucking bug finally comes out; or its ghastly spawn takes over my kitchen. I don't seem to be able to stop worrying about the damn thing.

Maybe I'll call Peter.

Or maybe I'll sell my house.

THE END

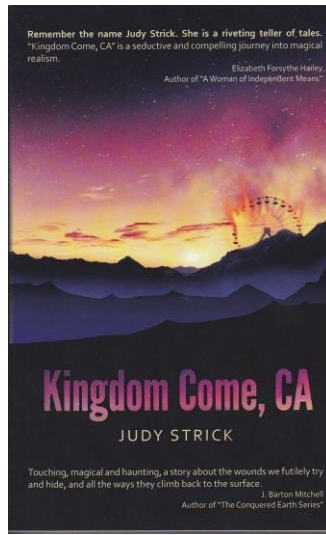
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Judy Strick is a true storyteller. I was immediately taken into a dark, fascinating world of her creation and couldn't follow her fast enough until the last page when I was summarily booted out and left blinking in the sunshine, bereft. I was left with that familiar sweet sorrow on finishing a book I wished I had yet to read.

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