

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



Story № 2

Mick and Lila

DOWNTOWN L. A.

Imagine this: Your archetypal trendy/chic downtown artists loft; high ceiling, exposed ducting, concrete floors and large industrial windows- those very windows that are now cracked open to let in whatever breeze there might be on a hot summer night. The only tree on the entire block, a scrawny ragged palm, is silhouetted in the frosted glass. Outside sounds filter in, sounds of the city: wail of sirens, rumble of traffic, crazy man shouting from the stairwell next door, blare of bad mariachi music drifting over from the corner; the hum of the great machine that is Los Angeles. Seated across from each other at the vintage Eames table are two good-looking women, of a vaguely bohemian mien, no longer young, but not yet old. The kind of people you expected to

see living in the arts district. One of them is even an artist. There is an open bottle of pinot grigio.

They were both dressed casually that early evening, Lila in faded jean shorts, a tight black tank top, and motorcycle boots, not that she had a motorcycle; she just happened to like the look. Mick was in black leggings and a dark monk-like top- a style she had been affecting lately. They both had severe hair: Mick's was chin length, geometric, blunt cut; there were a few glints of grey, which she seemed to be embracing; Lila's was cut very short, except for the hair on top of her head, which was and was long, spiked, blond-tipped and slightly aggressive, like a displaying bird. They were both slender-boned women of medium height, both dark haired and brown eyed. Mick was five years older than Lila. People sometimes thought they were sisters.

They had been lovers. They had once called each other "Baby".

"I found a place today," Lila was saying.

"Oh?" Mick- *nee* Michelle- sounded wary. "When are you leaving?"

"The lease starts the first of the month."

"Oh."

"It's only two weeks. I hope that's not a problem." Lila said.

“No” Mick answered, tersely. She owned the loft they had been sharing for the last five years. They had met at a gallery opening. Mick had bought one of Lila’s paintings, which were called ‘Biomorphic Inversions’. They were lurid and looked like intestines to the untrained eye. To the trained eye they looked like Francis Bacon. Mick’s eye was not trained then.

Lila came over to the loft to help with the installation, and never left. The painting still hangs on the wall behind them, the fossil of a love.

“Will you be living by yourself?” Mick asked, way too casually.

“Jesus Christ,” Lila flared quickly, as she was prone to do. “Of course I’m living alone.”

There had been jealousy between them in the past.

“Just curious,” Mick said with just the slightest hint of annoyance. “Nothing personal.”

And for a moment the room was filled with icy shards of tension, palpable enough to make the dog get down off the Herman Miller chair, and head for the bed at the end of the room. They both watched him trotting across the polished cement floor, his heels clicking glassily, his legs slipping slightly. He was getting old.

They had chosen Wheezer together from a no-kill shelter in Pasadena. There he was, caged with two pacing ruffians, sitting behind bars, looking at them with pleading eyes, wagging tail, what could they do? He was a border

collie mix with a collapsed trachea, so he wheezed all the time- hence the name. They were told he was a year old when they adopted him. As it turned out, he was much older- kind of like a “Match.Com” date. But Wheezer was much loved whatever his age and infirmities.

The dog plunked himself down on top of the slate grey, Armani covered platform bed behind the Shoji screen, and wheezed loudly into the vast silence. Lila drained off the last of the pinot grigio remaining in her glass, then poured herself another.

“You’re drinking too much,” Mick said.

Lila ignored Mick and stared at the cuticles on her right hand. “I want Wheezer,” she said.

“What about your new apartment? Will they take pets?”

“They’re flexible.”

Another long silence.

Mick said finally “I think he should stay with me. I can take him to the office, “You can’t stay home all day with a dog now; you’re going to have to go out and find yourself a job. No more playing artist and hanging out with the cool kids, while Mother picks up the bills.“ She turned and gestured at the far wall where two dark 4x4 grimly expressionistic canvases hung, above eight more canvases that were stacked against the white wall. Lila had been working on them for the last two years, getting ready for a mythical show.

Mick once had thought that Lila was a brilliant artist. She had been to enough art shows since then to know better. These latest works were derivative-Amsel Kieffer; anyone with half an eye could see that.

“These are not going to pay for the rent, you know.” Lila’s expenses had been very low.

“Fuck you,” Lila muttered under her breath,

“Too bad you didn’t get that MA in Architecture when I said I’d send you.”

“I have no interest architecture. I can’t comprehend higher mathematics, or learn engineering principles, or draw plans. I’m not you. And if I remember correctly you used to love that about me. Remember? I was your other half, the Yin to your Yang. You loved my creative side, my talent, my access to my emotions.”

“I was hopelessly romantic then. We were in love.” Mick let the comment about talent pass. “You would’ve been a good architect,” she said, leaving the rest of her thought unsaid.

“If I’d wanted to be any kind of architect at all.”

“If you had, you wouldn’t be worrying about the rent. You’d be telling me to go fuck myself.”

“Go fuck yourself!”

They were at a stand-off, arms folded on the table, glaring across a void, across a chasm, an eternity.

Outside, the old woman in the apartment house next door was shrieking a song out of the second story window- "TEN CENTS A DANCE, THAT'S WHAT THEY PAY ME," she offered drunkenly to any hapless passerby... "BOY HOW THEY WEIGH ME DOWN..."

Inside, not a word was said.

Outside, the city hummed and honked and rumbled along with the old woman's song.

And not a word was said. And although Lila teared up, no tears were shed.

Lila was the first to break the silence. "I want Wheezer!"

The look that passed between them was charged with anger.

"No I don't think so!" Mick's arms were folded intransigently across her chest. "We have to think of what's best for the dog."

Another silence, a dare to look away.

Lila once again, broke first. "I found him, goddamn you. It was my idea to get a dog."

Mick's voice had an undertone of anger. "I paid the vet bills, and the adoption fees. I paid for the goddamn fucking kibble."

"Money, it's always about fucking money!" Lila shouted jumping to her feet. "You're worse than my goddamn father, worse than my goddamn mother, worse than my goddamn ex-husband. Artists just don't make money unless they're famous; especially women artists. You knew that going in. I thought you believed in me."

"I did."

They were both aware of the past tense.

There was a loud silence, during which they glared at each other like a couple of Red Beta fighting fish, separated from killing each other by a thin piece of glass.

The silence was shattered by Wheezer's loud snores. He appeared to be dreaming, his feet twitching as if he were tracking imaginary prey.

They both looked over at the bed. The slate grey comforter was disheveled, the dog still twitching.

Lila's eyes met Mick's eyes. Both pairs of eyes glistened, for just a moment.

Then Lila got abruptly to her feet. "I'm taking him when I move."

"Over my dead body," said Mick.

“Oh yeah?” said Lila, rubbing her hands together.

Mick's fists were clenched and her knuckles white.

All civility had fled, by the time Lila decided to get the hell out of the loft that very night, to stay with her brother in Silverlake for the next two weeks, until her new apartment was available.

Furniture had been shoved around, pottery broken, large paintings hauled off the walls. Their screams of recrimination drifted out the open windows into the ambient sounds of the L.A. night.

Wheezer had an asthma attack at the height of the brouhaha.

They drove him to the animal emergency room together, in Lila's problematic Chrysler PT Cruiser, through the dark and deserted streets of an indifferent city. Mick sat in back with Wheezer, stroking his furry brow as he gasped for air.

Peace reigned on the ride up Beverly Boulevard to the Emergency Vet.

“How's he doing?” Lila asked from the front seat.

“I don't know Baby, I just don't...” and Mick shut up, embarrassed.

And they were both silent after that.

They sat in the waiting room of the animal hospital, together, holding hands in the light from a flickering fluorescent overhead bulb. They stared at the aquarium, and the imposingly large pair of angel-fish swimming around, oblivious to their presence. They took turns crying.

Wheezer died that night. So did the last vestige of love that Mick and Lila had left between them.

They shared a piece of lemon Meringue pie and an order of pancakes at an all-night Denny's in Hollywood. The place was pretty much deserted, except for a burnt out old waitress in a crumpled yellow uniform and a skinny bearded guy in Johnny Cash black, sitting at a booth at the back. He had a huge plated of fries in front of him. He was conspicuously reading a bible.

There was an ambient fluorescent hum. It was the only sound in the place. It was like "Nighthawks at the Diner".

Mick and Lila didn't have much to say to each other. Lila picked at a crack in the formica tabletop. Mick looked out the window at the passing traffic. Or perhaps she was staring at her reflection in the window.

Mostly they looked at the food and ate.

Then Mick called a cab and went back to the loft, and Lila went to her brother's house in Silverlake.

She came for her belongings the next day, when Mick was at the office.

They had Wheezer cremated and split the ashes.

Lila wore his chrome ID tag around her neck for a while.

It once had been good between them.

THE END

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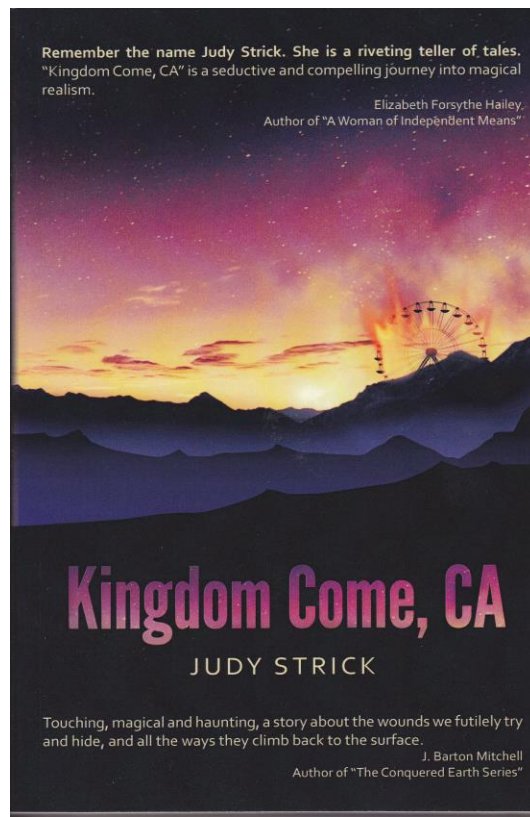
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Judy Strick is a true storyteller. I was immediately taken into a dark, fascinating world of her creation and couldn't follow her fast enough until the last page when I was summarily booted out and left blinking in the sunshine, bereft. I was left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

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