

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



Story № 5

The Rabbit Hole

ENCINO: THE SAN FERNANDO VALLEY

Encino is very hot in the summer. It gets hotter the further north you go. Everyone wants to live south of Ventura Boulevard -- the farther south the better. In fact if you keep going south, you'll be out of the valley altogether. And then north becomes desirable.

Gertrude Way is a sleepy little street four blocks south of the Boulevard. The weather up there is ten degrees cooler than the floor of the valley. It's a nice street -- very Ozzie and Harriet -- with good sidewalks lined with big old Jacarandas trees that that drip purple blossoms in the spring. The houses on

Gertrude have yet to be gobbled up by McMansions, as have the streets slightly further up the hill -- the "Donas": Dona Maria Dr., Dona Carlotta Rd., Dona Margarita St. -- huge houses filling entire lots. The houses on the flats, where the streets are named after the developers' families, are older -- smaller, each one unique; The lots are bigger with dappled sunlight from old growth trees, pepper trees, oaks, sycamores.

The Cooper family had lived for three decades in one such house half way up the street; the two-story colonial covered in bougainvillea vines. It was far too large a house for one person. People are affected by too much time alone... not everyone, but some people.

As you will see...

Ellen Cooper first heard the voices when she was still half asleep -- still pulling herself out of her dreams. She must have left the stupid, downstairs television on again; dammit; she was becoming so damn forgetful: losing her keys all the time, dialing a phone number and forgetting by the second ring who the hell she was calling. This was not the first time she had awakened to the sound of the early morning news. Do people get Alzheimer's when they're fifty-five? How old was Rita Hayworth? Her own mother didn't come down with it until she was in her eighties. It had become apparent that the old lady was bonkers when she once heard the phone ringing, picked up a loaf of French bread, said "hello" and proceeded to have a conversation. Ellen had vowed that if she started showing signs of dementia, she would kill herself --

in a gentle and benign way. She would not stick around with oatmeal for brains.

Maybe, she thought that morning as she dragged herself out of bed, maybe she had left the TV on unconsciously because she liked the sound of human voices. She missed the ambient chatter now that Thomas was no longer around. It had been two years since he had died, keeled over in the gym. He'd had a massive heart attack. He had been a healthy man until that terrible day, taken very good care of himself -- all those push-ups and exercise bikes and vegan diets. There's just no getting away from your DNA.

She had been totally unprepared for his unexpected departure.

Sometimes she thought she could feel him lying next to her in bed. He had become like a phantom limb. Sometimes she thought she could hear him talking from downstairs. Perhaps that's what she was hearing now.

No. These sounds were real.

Maybe she had been living alone for too long.

Ellen had pretty much stopped leaving her house eighteen months after Thomas died. There was no point, really, in going out; except for the basic necessities. Her children came to visit whenever they were in town. She knew the neighbors, who could be reached in an emergency. The Yardleys next door had been here as long as she and Thomas. They had been friends. Their kids had grown up together.

But there was a for sale sign now in front of the Yardley house. They were moving to Healdsburg. They bought a small vineyard. They really stopped being friends anyway since the kids all left home and Thomas died.

That's the way it happens, a lot of couples drift away from you once you're a widow.

It was okay, she was used to being alone. She had her habits, the way single people do. And she always turned off all the lights when she went to bed, and made sure the TV was shut down for the night.

So she was surprised that morning to hear the sound of human voices.

Okay, something else she forgotten. She had left the damn TV on after all. If and when she started leaving the remote control in the refrigerator she'd get worried.

The volume was lower than usual; she could barely make out the sounds, but it was a man and a woman. She shook her head, but the voices did not go away until she had closed the bathroom door behind her.

Ellen brushed her teeth, squinting at the new lines that seemed to be popping up on her face every morning. She spat out her Rembrandt toothpaste and looked at her artificially white teeth. At least her teeth looked young.

"I should get a dog," she thought as she approached the stairs. "This house is so empty." Ellen had loved and lost five dogs throughout the time of

her marriage. Her last dog, Jasper, a Corgi, had died two weeks before Thomas died. They'd had a very strong connection, Jasper and Thomas. She had found the thought of trying to replace either of them out of the question. She couldn't deal with the hovering inevitability of more loss. So many losses in a lifetime: the loss of innocence, the loss of freedom, the loss of love, of time gone -- the empty nest, the hospital beds, the funerals.

She closed her eyes, counting the steps as she descended. There were fourteen stairs. She had once figured out that she'd climbed these stairs at least twenty-two thousand times since she had been living here. She and Thomas almost had their thirtieth anniversary in this house. There would have been a big party... they would have hired a tent for the backyard. They had gotten married on a July 4th -- so there would always be fireworks.

The voices were getting louder now. She walked into the den to shut down the TV, but it was already off. Yet she could still hear the voices, and now she knew that they were coming from the kitchen. It must be the radio, which she had moved to the counter near the sink, for the ambient sound of voices to occupy her mind when she was preparing her boring meals.

She followed the sounds down the hall that led to the large open room where all the family meals had been prepared and consumed -- thirty years of cooking and chopping and serving; and there was nobody left to cook for, or

serve, or clean up after. Peter and Abby had been gone for ten years, off living their own lives.

As she approached the kitchen the voices grew louder. The sound coming through the doorway was dimensional.

When she walked through the door, there at the breakfast nook, bigger than life, sat two complete strangers, a man and a woman, well-dressed and nonchalant, making themselves at home at her table, oblivious to her presence. They were engaged in an animated conversation about someone named Martha. They ignored her, and continued talking about Martha, whose husband was apparently filing for divorce.

Ellen was too astonished to say anything.

“It’s going to cost them both a fortune,” the man was saying. “Elliot is suing her for custody of those two yappy Dachshunds.”

“They’re very cute dogs,” the woman answered.

“Dogs are dogs,” said the man. “They’re all cute once you get to know them.”

“Excuse me... ?” Ellen said somewhat timorously. Her hands started to sweat and her heart pounded and she was filled with fear. She cleared her throat loudly for emphasis.

Apparently no one was offended by her intrusion. In fact they didn’t seem to notice her.

“Dearest,” the woman said, as if Ellen weren’t there, “We both love dogs. Once we’re settled in, we’ll have dogs, two dogs.”

“So much less expensive than children,” the man said with a smile, reaching across the table to touch the woman’s hand.

“Who are you?” Ellen said firmly, hoping her voice didn’t quiver, “What are you doing here in my kitchen?”

The two people ignored her, as if she were not standing there in front of them, hands on hips, eyes flashing.

“No yappy Dachshunds,” the man said. “I can hear them now: Yap, yap, yap...”

“Am I going crazy?” Ellen thought to herself, remembering her mother’s last days, when the old lady had walked around holding a baby doll, cooing to it, bathing it, believing it to be a real infant. “She’s such a good little girl, so quiet,” her mother had often said contentedly.

That thought scared Ellen more than the immediate reality of two complete strangers sitting in her kitchen talking about Dachshunds.

“Maybe a sturdier dog, a Corgi, perhaps,” the woman said. “I’m very fond of Corgies.”

Ellen blinked in astonishment.

“What the hell is going on here?!” Ellen demanded, her voice shrill.

Once again they were oblivious to her indignant presence.

“Babies make so much noise,” the woman was saying to the man. The woman was youngish -- early thirties. She was attractive in a studious, self-assured way. “But they can be cute.”

“If only there was an off-button.” He seemed to be a few years older than the woman: graying temples, assertive nose, handsome.

The conversation was beginning to have a familiar ring to it. As if she was in a dream. But of course this was not a dream.

“EXCUSE ME,” Ellen interrupted them again, this time more loudly. “THIS IS MY KITCHEN!”

He turned and looked in Ellen’s direction, but through her.

“What *is* that rattling sound?” The man got up from the table and walked right past Ellen, and checked out the ceiling vent, which he adjusted and then returned to the table.

“I DON’T WANT TO HAVE TO CALL THE POLICE!” Ellen said in as assertive and fearless manner as she could muster up, all things considered.

“So damn noisy. These old houses always have something going wrong,” the man said, standing up and heading toward the stove. “Now the teakettle is whistling.” He started fussing around at the counter, the new granite counter that had been installed the year before Thomas died.

“Ah good,” the woman said, as if it were her house. “Will you please bring me a cup of Earl Grey,”

“There isn’t any Earl Grey, you’re going to have to settle for English Breakfast.”

“YOU HAVE TO LEAVE! RIGHT NOW,” Ellen shouted, consumed with impotent rage. Unfortunately, the man was standing right near the phone, so she couldn’t run over and dial 911.

“Turn the teakettle off for Christ’s sake,” the woman shouted in to the man. “It’s absolutely screeching.”

The man returned with two mugs of steaming tea; Ellen’s mugs from the crafts museum, Ellen’s teas from Whole Foods, Ellen’s water. He put one mug in front of the woman and sat down again with the other mug; at Ellen’s table.

“We’re going to have to do something about that fence,” the man said. “Dog-proof it. We don’t want the dogs running wild in the street.”

Ellen was no longer frightened, or even angry. She was more curious now than horrified. She felt vaguely like she had fallen down the rabbit hole.

“Who are you?” she said.

Of course they ignored her. They drank her tea and chatted away at her table.

“Do you think dogs will ever really replace children? The woman said.

“Small dogs,” he answered.

She remembered, almost the same words, more-or-less, when she and Thomas were young and in love, and not yet thinking in terms of children. They both wanted to see what kind of parents they’d be. They decided to try a dog first. That was Trigger, a sheepdog mix whom they both adored.

Ellen laughed out loud at the brief memory, but of course, they didn’t hear her.

Or perhaps they did.

“There must be wind chimes hanging out there,” the woman said.

“Ah, how nice,” he commented, almost wistfully. “What a lovely sound.”

Ellen was surprised to find herself flushing with pleasure.

So she went into the kitchen, got herself a mug and made herself a cup of the Earl Grey tea, which she had no trouble finding. The tea tin was sitting right there on the counter.

And Ellen took her cup of tea, walked over to the kitchen table, pulled up a chair and sat down.

As she was to do many days thereafter.

Why not?! Their conversation was interesting; they gossiped about interesting friends and famous celebrities, talked about interesting travels, and movies, and music, and the problems of the world. They were attractive, interesting people.

She often joined in with them -- offering her opinions when it felt appropriate. If they noticed at all, they commented on the draftiness of the house, or the plumbing or the appliances. Sometimes though, she sounded like music to them: a harp, chimes, a harmonica, bells... She lived for those times.

Well, what the hell?! Why not? At least they weren't boring.

And they liked dogs.

THE END

Please visit [Living on the Fault Line... Tales from L. A.](#) to read all the short stories in this series.

And while there, sign up for a newsletter to receive announcements when a new short story becomes available.

#1 When Love Congeals (February 2015)

#2 Mick and Lila (March 2015)

#3 Ugly Toes (April 2015)

#4 Buzzed (May 2015)

#5 The Rabbit Hole (June 2015)

#6 Memoirs of a 70 Year Old Stoner (July 2015)

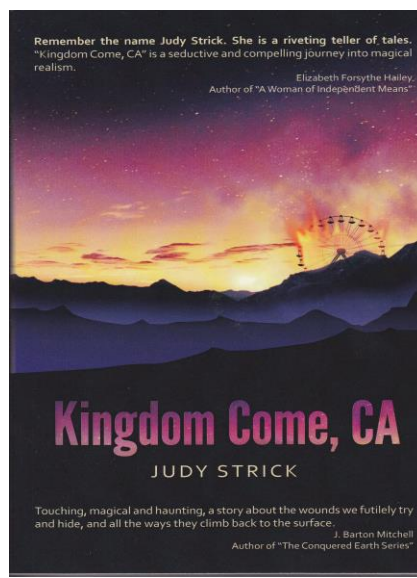
#7 Venus and Mars (August 2015)

#8 The White Cat (September 2015)

... and if you enjoyed "The Rabbit Hole," please share your thoughts with

Judy on her [Facebook page](#) or [via email](#).

To read more by Judy Strick



**Please check out Judy Strick's critically acclaimed
debut novel**

[Kingdom Come, CA](#)

Read an [excerpt here](#) or on [Amazon](#)

Praise for *Kingdom Come, CA*

“In her debut, Strick successfully writes with the confidence of a seasoned author... A clear new voice offering a startling, memorable debut.”

–*Kirkus Reviews*

“Remember the name Judy Strick. She is a riveting teller of tales. *Kingdom Come, CA* is a seductive and compelling journey into magical realism.”

–*Elizabeth Fortsythe Hailey, author of A Woman of Independent Means*

“Touching, magical and haunting, a story about the wounds we futilely try and hide, and all the ways they climb back into the surface.”

– *J. Barton Mitchell, author of The Conquered Earth Series*

“A taut, supernatural thriller, haunting and eerie.”

–*Edward Cohen, author of Israel Catfish*

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.

–*Kendall Hailey, author of The Day I Became an Autodidact*

Kingdom Come, CA is an enticing title for a book that won't let you stop reading. Judy Strick sets up the various mini-denouements with seeming ease and grace, yet each one nevertheless brings a satisfying surprise.

–*Kathy Cohen, screenwriter of Imminent Pearl*