

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



Story № 3

Ugly Toes

SILVERLAKE

The lake in Silverlake is not a natural lake. It's a reservoir. Nonetheless it's very satisfying to live near a body of water -- even if it has concrete banks and is surrounded by chain link fences. The trees and the parkland are real however, and momentarily make one forget that this is not a small Italian lakeside town; make one forget that the rough energy of downtown L.A. is just a hilltop away.

The streets north of Sunset, the good side of the Boulevard, are narrow steep and winding. Waverly Terrace is one such street. On the west

side of Waverly, the houses are built into the ascending hillside; on the east side they perch on the edge of the hill, overlooking the reservoir and the not so distant skyline.

Lily Antin lives on the west side of Waverly Terrace, halfway up the street, in a redwood and glass, 1980s, split level, nestled against the hillside which is heavily reinforced for the big rains that never come anymore. There are unseen pontoons involved in the foundation. Of course the house has been built to be to withstand a nine-pointer. Which Lily, in the dark recesses of her mind of her mind, is always waiting for; as are most people living on the jigsaw puzzle of fault lines squiggling under the greater L.A. Basin.

Lily, however, had her own personal earthquake four years ago, when her husband of fourteen years, with no warning signs whatsoever, upped and left her for another woman. She was shaken to her very foundations; it was a ten-pointer. But one adapts.

At least she got to keep the house, and paying the mortgage is cheaper than paying rent. William felt guilty and William, while not rich, was not poor; radiologists are never poor. So there were no community property battles.

For a while now Lily has been in a constant state of adaptation to things that have been imposed on her by the whimsies of life. It can be wearing.

On this particular late June afternoon we meet Lily in in her bathtub, as she looks at her right foot. She's been looking at the same foot, in the same bathtub, for the last fourteen years.

She's propped her foot on the porcelain rim near the faucets so she can adjust the temperature of the water with her toes; her right large-toe actually. She's right-footed and right-handed, but her left eye is dominant. So was Albert Einstein she has read somewhere.

This is the way the baths go: a full tub, water perfumed and warm, but not too warm, about the temperature of the sun at the beach right before you need to find shade. Lily luxuriates in her bubbles and her oils. The minute the bathwater cools, becomes an iota less than perfect, she props her big toe against the handle of the hot water faucet, pushes carefully until a trickle of steaming hot water dribbles down. She basks in layers of hot and cold water as the little stream of heat invades the chill, like a hot-spring in arctic ice, and the bath is perfect again -- for a brief blissful moment, until it becomes slowly but inexorably too hot, and her face starts to sweat. So she reaches over with her right toe and opens the cool tap.

Perfection... loss... perfection... loss... it can go on for hours if she's in the mood and doesn't mind getting pruney. She has taken approximately 1,825 baths in this very tub. She's been looking at that very foot, on that very rim, for much of her adult life. During that time the colors of the bathroom walls have changed, the century has changed, her life has changed, as has

her hair color, weight, and cheekbones. But her feet have always looked pretty much the same.

Good feet, she always had good feet, slim, well-shaped. One tends to take good feet for granted, worrying more about incipient signs of decay on other parts of the body.

Now, as if a scrim has been lifted from her eyes, it occurs to her that that her feet are nothing at all like the girlish feet that had once rested gracefully against the white porcelain, had once run barefoot in the grass. They've changed slowly, like water growing cold in the tub -- unnoticed until it's become unpleasant. The foot she sees now has been through a lot of living. She thinks back to her young, smooth, soft feet with slender, pedicured toes. These feet are bony, veiny, a callous here, a corn there; heels tough as hooves from years of going barefoot, toes spoiled by bumps from ill-fitting shoes. The big toe on her right foot, the one she uses to control the heat in the bathtub, twists inward. She fractured that toe years ago when she fell off a bike on the Santa Monica bike path, in the days when she and William used to bike every Sunday -- well we don't want to dwell on that.

"Fuck it! My damn toes are ugly! My feet are getting OLD!" Lily thinks.

Aging feet, aging anything is a breath away from being a thought, all the time lately. Lily is now very aware that she is, how shall we put it, no longer the ingénue; too old to be promising in many arenas, the most important being career, love, and children. She had once been promising in all those categories: she had married a tall man whom she loved, who loved

her, who was her best friend. As for career, she was creative, artistic -- and sooner or later she'd know how to use those gifts. And she was easy on the eyes, which perhaps was a bit of a free pass. As for the kids, well, they'd happen too, like a career. Time was infinite once...

Oh the folly of assumptions: the love thing blew up in her face. Career-wise, she just couldn't really figure out what she wanted to do, though she tried very hard to find herself. She'd worked as an assistant to an interior designer for a while, until it went sour. Then she was a docent for LACMA, then she worked as a volunteer in the Downtown Library, and on the hotline at a battered women's shelter. And as for kids? Whoops -- it turned out that Lily apparently had "temperamental eggs," and kids never happened and she's suddenly too old. Not that she and William hadn't tried. But in vitro scared her -- all those shots, messing with your hormones like that... They'd talked about adoption, even considered fostering -- for about two minutes.

Anyway, the way things had worked out, it's just as well. She had no desire to be a single mother....

The water is beginning to cool; She turns the hot water tap ever so slightly with her slightly deformed right big toe, and hot water trickles down. Her big toes are double jointed. She and William used to joke about her prehensile toes when they were in love. Four years ago, by the time he had moved out, Lily knew that he no longer found her trick feet endearing. She had known for a while that sex between them had become uninteresting, like a favorite food eaten too often; and they had stopped laughing together. They

had nothing more to say to each other. Just like that, “forever” can become “nevermore,” and you don’t even see it coming.

She stares again at her toes. She really should start getting pedicures again, but she can’t stand to have someone kneeling in front of her, washing and polishing her ugly toes and sanding and buffing her aging feet, like some barbarian queen with a slave. That’s why her toenails always have that homemade look about them now. Her hand is unsteady, she’s not great at the edges, and she never has the patience to let the polish dry properly. She really should make some attempt to take better care of herself, if she doesn’t want to be alone for the rest of her life. Although, after four years, this seems to be a problem that a good pedicure won’t be able to solve.

Tonight her toes are glazed with lilac colored nail polish. It looks stupid. She can no longer wear lilac, or hot pink, or apple-green, or black -- especially black, however fashionable those colors are. No one over eighteen should have black toenails; not that she ever wears any of those colors, but at least, until the last few years, the option was always there.

Options -- the implication of freedom... of choice... so much of life gives you so few good options... Oh, what is she complaining about? Spoiled bitch. She had options: she wasn’t born in some pestilent slum in some Third World country. She could have been more proactive. Instead of volunteering, she should have become a professional something. But, well, we all make decisions and decisions are made for us. She would rather not be alone but she had no choice in the matter. She would rather not have to start looking for

a job, her resumé, at best, is sketchy. Nobody gives a shit about work you do for free.

So money issues are an approaching cloud on her horizon.

But soon she will have no choice. Not if she doesn't want to find her ass kicked out of her house, and onto the street. There's a homeless old lady who lives under the graffiti encrusted freeway overpass, on Silverlake Blvd. She scavenges in garbage cans, and dumpsters and she's missing a couple of teeth. Lily once made eye contact with the old woman and saw herself.

And here she is now, without a career, or a child and alone as can be, soaking in the water like an otter with a clam, in her lilac scented bubble-bath, looking at her lilac-colored toenails and for the moment, not worrying one bit because she has decided not to worry. She prefers bubbles to salts, no matter how good the salts smell. Bath salts make her feel like a pickling corned beef.

She looks away from her ugly toes and fogs out in the steam from the water and stares at the bathroom walls, sweating now from ambient steam. At this moment in time, the bathroom is painted tomato red. She had gone red to cheer herself up. Not only do the red walls fail to cheer her up, when her bathwater gets hot she feels like she's boiling in a lobsterpot. When the walls sweat, they look like they're bleeding.

When she and William first moved in, they had painted the bathroom bright yellow with white trim. They used to bicker over the colors of the various rooms in the house all the time. That's when they were in love. The

bickering was a kind of a courtship ritual, like pigeons on a telephone wire pecking at each other. They'd fight, then they'd make love; all over the house: kitchen, bathroom, back deck, garage and then they'd go back to bickering about what they'd have for dinner that night...

When they'd bought the house, there were two bedrooms and one bathroom. The second bedroom was to be used as a nursery, and they would add on as needed. But as it happened, there was no need for add-ons. The closest they came to parenthood was a golden retriever named Caroline who they bought as a wedding gift to themselves. Caroline was a male, but they had both decided, the minute they laid eyes on the blond puppy that his name could be nothing but Caroline. Caroline died shortly after William moved out. It was not from a broken heart. He was old, fourteen. Big dogs don't live as long as small dogs. Caroline went out gloriously in a volley of farts.

Sometimes Lily thinks of getting another dog; a small dog this time -- one who will last a little bit longer. But she's never gotten around to it, although she loves dogs. A dog ties you down. You can't travel. Not that she travels all that much, but at least she could if she wanted to. She could stay in Tuscany for a month if she wanted, since she doesn't have a dog to worry about. Maybe she'd meet the next love of her life on some winding little road in some small Tuscan village. She's certainly not doing all that well in L.A. She hates the bar scene, although there are plenty of bars in Silverlake -- cool bars, where the hipsters hang. But she's not a hipster, nor has she ever felt like hanging out in cool hipster bars. She's tried computer dating. Oh yes; she's had many a latte at the Starbucks on Vermont, coffee dates with men who had either lied about

themselves, were incompatible, or worst of all had not been interested in her. She had not been prepared for that. Before she was married, well, she never had trouble keeping her dance card full. Now she's used goods... ah yes, tempus fugit.

The trickle of hot water has started to cool. Soon it will be ice cold. The water heater needs to be replaced. This is an issue Lily does not want to deal with at the moment, thank you very much, or the roof that needs repair. She should move -- get rid of all this responsibility, downsize. She tells herself this at least once a week. She could live now, wherever she wanted. She could get a condo at the beach, a small condo that would make small demands, and let the homeowners association deal with the leaky roof. She could live in Marina del Rey, Manhattan Beach where singles live. She could live any damn place she chooses. "Pretty soon now," she tells herself. "One of these days." She does not want to wind up like her mother, who's been living in the same house she moved into when she was a bride. Now she's a spidery, dotty old lady, who will probably end up dying in the same damn house. Lily's mother used to be smart and she used to be beautiful. Now she's like a crumbling old leaf, all dried out at the edges and fragile.

Lily looks at her feet. She used to have her mother's feet, slim and fine-boned. Her mother's feet now are gnarled and bony with freckled crepey skin and thick ugly toenails. Lily checks her feet for freckles -- nothing yet. She's sure her feet will wind up looking like her mother's. Her mother was so pretty once.

“What do you want to be when you grow up, little girl?”

“I want to be beautiful.”

She was never beautiful. William used to tell her she was, but she never believed him. He stopped telling her she was beautiful a couple of years before he left. In the last year of their marriage he had stopped looking her in the eye. In the last six months he'd spent more time with the dog than he did with her. She had been surprised that he didn't take Caroline with him when he moved to his fancy new condo downtown. But probably he didn't want to be saddled with an old dog, no matter how much he loved it.

Or maybe his new girlfriend didn't like dogs.

“Life is not fair,” her father always used to say to her as she was growing up. He was a psychoanalyst. He was crazy.

Tonight Lily has brought a magazine into her tub, a New Yorker she knew she would not read. She'll drift off again in her bubbles, changing the temperature of the water every once in a while until it's time to get dressed. Then she'll reluctantly drag herself out of the tub.

She knows this evening will be a waste of time. It was just easier to say yes than no. And they have had a bit of phone conversation and his picture is not half-bad, they're meeting for dinner -- his idea. Who knows,

maybe this one... maybe a little chemistry? One hopes? Anyway, it won't be a total loss. He's a career guidance counselor.

If she has time she'll paint her toenails a soft coral color.

THE END

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Please check out Judy Strick's critically acclaimed debut novel

[Kingdom Come, CA](#)

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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.”

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

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“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*