

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



Story № 8

The White Cat

WEST HOLLYWOOD

On a balmy Sunday, a walk down tree-lined Santa Monica Blvd. might put you in mind of stroll down the Las Ramblas in Barcelona, or The Embarcadero in San Francisco, or the Reforma in Mexico City; there's the same energy in the air, the rambling crowds and crowded cafes, and the couples, arm in arm, an occasional double stroller holding matching toddlers, propelled by two proud mommies, or two proud daddies. There are far more dogs being walked than children. The Boulevard is where the Gay Pride

Parade happens, and the Halloween bacchanal when the Boulevard is closed from La Cienega to Doheny Drive.

The little town itself is quite compact and lovely, tree-lined streets and well-kept property. North of the Boulevard, it's mostly newer condos and apartments; south of the Boulevard, charming old Mediterranean duplexes and small Spanish style bungalows existing side by side, with Craftsman cottages. It's a village in the heart of the city -- a very chic community.

I've lived in one such Craftsman duplex on La Jolla Avenue for a good part of my adult life -- a lot of years.

My name is Wiley Frame. Lately I seem to be haunted by memories of one of my recent neighbors. Her name was Catherine. She was the prettiest girl I'd ever seen -- even out here, in the land of pretty girls. We shared a common wall and a front porch in a side-by-side bungalow duplex.

I've lived here for many years and I've seen many neighbors come and go, but I will never forget Catherine, who was here for such a very short time.

I first met her the afternoon she moved in, a hot day in March. The palm trees in front of the house had lost a few fronds in the blistering Santa Ana winds -- the Devil's breath some call it.

I'd been watching out my window as two handsome young men carried boxes out of a U-Haul truck. A new neighbor is always an adventure, and you

can learn so much by what they bring with them. There seemed to be very little furniture -- a bed, a chair, a desk, a table, a queen-sized mattress. There were many cartons.

At 5:30 my doorbell rang, and there stood this girl-woman. I tried not to stare. She was slim, almost fragile looking, with a head full of electric red curls. Her eyes were green and large, a true beauty. She was dressed rather nondescriptly -- jeans, athletic shoes, a green polo style t-shirt. Her lack of chic was perfect. I am an epicure of lovely women. I wish I were one, but alas, I've been born in the body of a short stout man.

She introduced herself, "Hi, I'm Catherine Norton, and I'm going to be your neighbor."

"Welcome to the neighborhood, I'm Wiley. Wiley Frame."

"Please come over and have a glass of champagne with us, Wiley Frame."

So of course I did.

I could not help but notice that Jeremy, our landlord, had painted her living room walls a soft sea-foam green; very nice. He hasn't painted my walls in at least fifteen years. My walls are getting very dingy. He wants to get rid of me. West Hollywood is rent-controlled; he could get twice as much if I left, but I like it here. I've been in my little half-house for twenty-eight years. I'll probably die here, and then Jeremy can paint the walls whatever damn color he wants.

The living room was full of boxes; there was the large leather chair, the desk, a tiny breakfast table in the corner and a TV, and that was it for furniture. We all sat down on boxes, and she introduced me to the movers, who as it turns out were her brother John and her boyfriend Lucas.

“John and I are twins, she said, all smiling as she poured me a glass of the bubbly.

“Identical?” I said, and they chuckled politely.

John was tall and dark and muscular -- very manly. Lucas on the other hand was lithe and handsome as a tiger. His eyes were a strange gold color. He shook hands with me when we were introduced. His handshake was very cautious.

“I have to be careful of my hands,” he said sliding his hand away from mine. “You’ll have to keep an eye out for my girl here,” he said. “I’m gone a lot.”

Lucas, it turns out, was a musician, a classical pianist.

“Oh, so you’re living here too?” I was a bit surprised. I know that our landlord prefers leasing to singles -- less noise, less wear and tear. Jeremy has a lot of rules: no live-ins who aren’t on the lease, no loud music after ten, no pets except fish. That’s why so many people come and go.

Lucas smiled, “I have my own place in the Sunset Towers.”

“Mmmmm...” I nodded, impressed. He must play a mean piano to be able to afford that palace. And here was his girlfriend moving into a tiny duplex in the low-rent part of West Hollywood. Odd.

“I wish they allowed pets here,” Catherine said. “I love animals.”

“You can have fish,” I suggested helpfully. “According to our landlord, fish don’t or bark or claw the woodwork or urinate on the floors. I have a saltwater aquarium and I’ve gotten to know my fish quite intimately. Fish have personalities, which I’ll bet you didn’t know; some are placid, some excitable - - a whole range of moods. And indeed they don’t urinate on the floors.”

So we chatted for a while. Their ears all perked up when they heard I had been a make-up artist at NBC, a card holding member of I.A.T.S.E, until I retired three years ago.

“Ah, so you’re in the ‘Business,’ ” John said. It turned out he was in the “Business”: a stuntman. “Catherine is too,” he volunteered.

“A stuntwoman?”

“Well she’s been known to pull a few odd stunts every now and then,” Lucas murmured. They all chuckled.

“At least I’m not dogged by fame,” Catherine said with a smile.

“Ah, you must be an actress -- excuse me, actor...” I said, blushing at my gaucherie.

“She is indeed,” said John proudly. “Let’s drink to that.”

So they poured more champagne and we laughed and talked, and I invited them over to see my fish, but they politely declined.

“I’ve got an early call tomorrow morning, and a lot of unpacking to do,” Catherine told me, sounding genuinely regretful.

“So you’re a *working* actor,” I said, surprised, because there are a whole lot of actors, but very few of them working at their craft. Los Angeles has the best looking waiters in the world.

John said proudly, “She’s got the lead in a small indie thriller.”

“Very small,” Catherine answered modestly. “Miniscule in fact. But it’s a good script. I probably won’t be seeing you around much for a while,” she said to me and she smiled, lovely smile, a smile that said “I like you, and in fact you are quite wonderful even if you are a little old and stout, and I want you for my friend.”

At least that’s what her smile said to me.

“I’ll keep an eye on things,” I said. “I always do, being both paranoid and nosy.”

We hugged when I left. I’m sure they all thought I was a doddering old queen, but I liked them and felt completely at ease. And Catherine, well, I was hopelessly smitten. I wanted to be her: to be so dewy new, with so many possibilities ahead for her... success, love, adventure.

I looked her up on the Internet that night. There was more information than I had expected. She had been a bit of a celebrity in fact. When she was five she played the precocious, adorable Bebe Jewel in *The Family Jewels* which had lasted for four seasons. It was a big hit in the mid-nineties, for a while she was the nation's favorite child. After that there were a few other small roles and then nothing -- oblivion at age ten. The next mention of her was six years later, when she went to Julliard to study acting; and a few years after that she was in an off Off-Broadway show, an avant-garde musical -- for which she got very good reviews in a few small magazines. There was a picture of her in a 2009 Vanity Fair, in their "Spotlight" section. She was wearing a forties bathing suit and holding a beach ball, with a very nice blurb predicting great things for her future.

Hmmm, little Bebe Jewel. How quickly they grow up.

I didn't see her much of her after that first afternoon. Only coming and going, and in our brief encounters we waved at each other, said hello, but she was always in a hurry. She was friendly though, and always seemed glad to see me, however momentarily.

She had been a good neighbor thus far; quiet, no parties, no loud music. It's always a crap-shoot; I once had a neighbor who used to play Wagner opera, at top volume, day and night, so loud that that the shared wall vibrated. Jeremy, much to his credit, kicked the opera-loving bastard's ass right out after a week of it.

So life goes on.

I have my daily routine: up at six, a leisurely breakfast, morning at the gym, afternoon spent walking rescue dogs at the West L.A. shelter, where I volunteer four afternoons a week. I spend some evenings with friends -- dinners in the neighborhood. But more often I'm at home with reality TV and a take-out dinner, asleep by ten -- at the latest. Some might call it a lonely life, a dull existence. I myself have been quite content; and there's certainly something to be said for contentment.

A few weeks after she had moved in, I saw Catherine on TV -- in a commercial for shampoo -- ah yes, her glorious hair. That was the most I saw of her in that first month. Every once in a while I would hear sounds from the other side of the wall, signs of life -- water flowing through pipes, footsteps. Sometimes I would see Lucas's black BMW parked at night out front; but it was always gone in the morning.

During that time I lost two fish, an Achilles Tang and a clownfish. I adopted a new one, a Blue Faced Angel -- very lovely and lively. I do not name my fish, nor do I name my car or my body parts. I am not that kind of person.

Midway through the month I decided to go to Las Vegas with a few of my less rowdy friends, so I hired a fish sitter to take care of my aquarium.

Mid-Sunday, before I left town, I went to Catherine's door to tell her that I'd be gone for a few days. Actually I wanted to say hello -- have a little contact before she forgot who I was. She was my dream girl. Oh not in a lurid way -- more in an aspirational way I would have to say.

I knocked, and when she didn't answer, I rang the bell. I knew she was there, I'd heard the flushing of the pipes before I came over; so I waited. I heard footsteps, and then she opened the door. She was in plaid flannel PJs, hair tousled from sleep -- adorable of course. She smiled when she saw me; but the smile was forced. Her eyes were different. The spark was gone

"I hope I didn't wake you," I said it carefully, not wanting to pry, but it was 2:30, a bit late to be sleeping unless you're ill. "Are you okay?"

She nodded her head, sniffing slightly. "I'm just tired. I've been working hard."

Now I know all about the terrible hours people keep in the business, so I didn't give it a second thought.

"I'm going to be gone for four days," I told her. "So if you see a tall bald fellow with a big potbelly coming and going from my place, he's taking care of my fish and my mail."

"Oh, okay" she nodded absently; polite but not quite there.

"I'm going to Las Vegas," I said, "if you have a lucky number you want me to play for you..."

She smiled and shrugged and shook her head. "I'm not a good luck type," she said, somewhat obliquely.

I could not help but glance over her shoulder. The living room was exactly as it had been when she'd first moved in. The cartons were still unpacked, no furniture had been added; there was just the TV, the desk, and the big ugly chair. Nothing of a personal nature: no knick knacks or vases or baskets or throw pillows, just brown boxes; no photos or paintings or posters; just bare, newly painted, sea-foam green walls.

It seemed very strange and bleak in that room; but I assumed that she had just been working too hard to get herself settled in.

I ran into her a few days after I returned; we chatted briefly, on the front porch about the weather, about the traffic, about my fish -- about nothing. Her eyes still had that flat look. Her smile was dead. There was no human connection. She excused herself abruptly, and then went inside.

That night I heard crying coming from her room. I think it was crying. I think it was her.

That night Lucas' car was parked in front of the house, and gone in the morning.

A week later there was a knock on my door. And when I opened it, there stood Catherine, a small pastel bunch of sweet peas in her hand, and a radiant smile on her face. For a moment again, I wished I were her.

She handed me the flowers. "I found these in the Farmer's Market, in Plummer Park. Aren't they lovely? They remind me of my childhood, but they used to smell much sweeter years ago, don't you think? I wonder; is it the sweet peas that have changed, or my sense of smell? Or is it just that I've gotten used to sweet peas and the thrill of newness is gone."

I took the little bouquet from her.

"It's such a lovely day today, isn't it?" she said stretching her arms out in approval of the sunshine.

"The flowers are wonderful, thank you," I said. "You seem to be in very fine spirits."

"It's anticipation. We're wrapping in two days. Yay! and Lucas and I are going to Hawaii for a little r and r. He's got a break in his schedule; a concert was canceled in Ottawa."

I invited her in for a cup of coffee, found a vase for the sweet peas, and then I introduced her to my fish.

"Look, that one with spots and the long nose is a clown Trigger, and that elegant puffball with the deadly spines is a Lionfish. And that little

character over there who looks like he's wearing a blue mask -- that's a Blue-faced Angel."

She seemed most interested, very enthusiastic; "They're so beautiful aren't they? Maybe I should get a fish. I love having pets. I used to have a cat when I was a kid. His name was Bebe; he was a white cat. I adored that cat. He understood me. He lived to be nineteen -- that's very old for a cat."

"Yes," I said, "my mother always had cats. Hers were all nasty possessive creatures."

"Oh, you," she laughed and gently punched my flabby bicep. "I bet you were jealous."

"Perhaps," I said, smiling.

Catherine told me that she'd be starting another job in the middle of the month, a pilot for a TV sitcom. "'Cheese and Crackers' it's called. It's a good cast, great writers and it's got a very good chance of getting picked up." Her eyes were sparkling and her face was animated. She crossed her fingers, "This might be the big one," and she grinned. "I could be next season's Jennifer Aniston. Maybe you'll come out of retirement and do my makeup."

Her enthusiasm was infectious. For a moment I contemplated her suggestion. It would be fun to work again on a big show... But no, I was quite happy to be out of that game; too hard on those of us of a certain age.

She gave me a lovely warm hug when she left, and she smelled of old lady lavender perfume, which I found charming

I didn't see her much after that.

One time, in passing, she told me that the Hawaiian trip had been canceled. Lucas's agent had booked him for a concert in Portland.

One day, I opened my front door to see a package lying on my doorstep. It was addressed to Catherine. I walked over and knocked on her door. I don't like leaving things out on the doorstep. There have been burglaries every now and then in the neighborhood, things stolen out of cars - - petty thefts but not to be encouraged.

She opened the door, looking like a marigold haired fairy; I handed her the package and was invited in for a glass of wine. Lucas was sitting in the big leather chair. There were a few new aluminum folding chairs scattered about the room.

"I see you've been furnishing the place," I said in a jovial way. Other than the folding chairs, everything seemed pretty much the same. The floor was cluttered with boxes, still unpacked.

Catherine smiled weakly, and Lucas laughed. "You see -- this is why she has to live in her own place." He laughed loudly as she poured me a glass of sparkling Prosecco. She did not laugh. I drank my wine and there was an awkward silence and then we all started talking at once.

Before there was time for Catherine to refresh the glasses, Lucas glanced at his watch, then stood.

“I have a plane to catch. I’ve got to leave.”

“Oh -- a concert?” I asked.

“No. This time it’s a visit to my kids.”

“Oh?” I said. He offered no further details.

“Stay, stay,” Catherine said to me, looking over her shoulder, as she got up from her bridge chair to walk Lucas to the door. I couldn’t read her eyes, but I sensed that she did not want to be alone.

They kissed, and she held onto Lucas longer than he held on to her.

As soon as the door closed behind him, I could feel her mood shift -- she put her head against the door, for just a few moments, her eyes closed.

When she looked back up, her eyes were dead. Her whole persona had changed, as if she had been drained of some vital fluid.

“I hate it when he goes back to New York. I’m terrified he’ll go back to his family. His kids have a tremendous hold over him.” She slumped, as if the words had exhausted her.

“How old are the children?”

“Johan is thirteen and Costanza is nine.”

“Mmmm, mmmmm,” I said, somewhat at a loss for words. “So he must be a lot older than you, to have children that age and an established career.”

“Yes, eighteen years older... that doesn’t matter to me.” Her eyes became more distant. “They’re divorced you know. Before I met him. He’s been married twice. He won’t marry again. He likes his space.”

“Oh.” I kept my mouth shut. I knew that anything I said would be taken the wrong way.

She got up and said sluggishly, “I hate it when he goes.”

I knew I was being dismissed.

A few days later I saw her and she was back to her old self, bubbly and excited, eyes sparkling, hair electric.

“Today’s my first day of rehearsals on ‘Cheese and Crackers.’ Wish me luck.”

“Break a leg,” I said, rolling my eyes so she would know I was being deliberately corny.

Late that morning, I heard a strange sound coming from her side of the house -- a piteous yowling. At first I thought it was a very annoying baby, and then I realized that these were not human sounds. Perhaps some creature was trapped. Perhaps it was under the porch. It could’ve been a cat or maybe a raccoon; raccoons can be very noisy. We’re not that far from the hills. We often have uninvited nighttime visitors, who sometimes decide to move in.

I checked out all the crawl spaces in our building. One had a loose screen that some creature might have used to gain access to the underbelly of the duplex. There I was, on my hands and knees, calling into the darkness... here kitty, kitty, kitty...

Whatever the creature was, I could hear it still yowling. I didn't know what to do.

So I took the course of least resistance and I left; went to the gym and then to West L.A. to walk my rescue dogs. After my shift was up, I stopped off at the Grove and saw a movie, to kill time. I fervently hoped that the noisy visitor would be gone when I returned. I didn't want to call animal control. I did not want to cause the death of a fellow creature.

It was dusk when I returned home. The house seemed quiet -- no hideous yowls. I noticed Catherine's little grey Subaru parked in the driveway. All was quiet on the Western front, so I went inside and watched "Doc Martin" on PBS. It was too early for my "Housewives".

It was quiet that night, the only sound, the occasional police helicopter.

The next day I heard the same yowling noises. It was mid-morning and Catherine's car was gone, so there was no point in checking it out with her. Once again the evening was quiet.

And the next day, after she left, it happened again.

On Thursday, morning, I saw her car parked out front, so I waited until ten, a respectable hour, then I walked over and knocked on her door.

I heard a shuffling, a slamming, then footsteps. The door opened a crack. Her hair was pulled back in a sloppy topknot, and she was wearing a white terrycloth robe. She just stood there, waiting for me to talk.

“I’ve been hearing something strange during the day,” I started in carefully, “Have you heard it, terrible moaning sounds? For the last few days. I think something might be living in the crawl space under the house, maybe trapped and hungry. It seemed to be coming from your side?”

She frowned and shook her head, opening the door a little wider. She did not look well. Her eyes had that dead look, as if her fire had gone out.

“Are you okay?”

She smiled a crooked little smile and said, “I’m being replaced. The network wanted a more ethnic actor for the part.” She laughed a little lilting phony laugh. “I told them I could pass for Irish. Wrong ethnicity.”

“Oh dear girl, I’m so sorry,” I said to her, wanting to hug her, yet sensing that it would be an intrusion at that moment. “Do you feel like company?”

She shook her head. “I’m tired.”

And then she shut the door, with a small apologetic smile, not exactly in my face.

It's a cold cruel profession. Especially for someone who's been at it all her life

I went out for dinner by myself that night. I did not feel like being in that house, and I don't know why.

As I left, I could hear the animal yowling again. I thought of leaving food out for it, but I didn't want to attract rats. And I didn't know what kind of food to leave, anyway.

I went down to the little Italian joint on Melrose where they know me. I was the only diner at that early hour. I ordered risotto with sausage and read "Variety," until Hank -- the only waiter in the place, brought my dinner over, and then sat down across the table from me. Hank liked to talk to me because of the "Business" -- Hank was an actor of course. So was his girlfriend. He was very up that night.

"Vanessa just got called for a part in a new sit-com."

Vanessa is black and very beautiful -- ethnic. I've sometimes seen her here, on Hank's shifts. She likes to talk to me about makeup.

"What's the sit-com?"

"Cheese and Crackers."

For a moment I was speechless... “Hmmm. Quite the coincidence,” I finally said, softly. “My neighbor just lost that very part.”

Hank smiled and shook his head. “It’s kind of like living in a small company town, isn’t it? Well the way things are going, it looks like I’ll be a waiter all my life, so it’s a good thing Vanessa is working... sometimes I think of going back home to Minnesota; but, well... it’s so fucking cold.”

It occurred to me, Catherine had no place to go back to. She was home already.

When I returned, Lucas’ car was parked in front of the house. Maybe that would brighten up my neighbor’s dark mood.

That night I was awakened at midnight by the same strange yowling noise that I’d heard during the day. It went on for a while, until there were footsteps. The noise stopped so I went back to sleep.

I was up the next morning at six o’clock as usual, and as usual Lucas’s car was gone.

I had a leisurely breakfast, a bowl of Special K with a sliced banana and non-fat milk, and a cup of strong black coffee. I’ve been having the same breakfast for years, more years than I care to remember. One gets used to things.

I sat in the chair by the window, reading a Vanity Fair, and waiting for a reasonable time to go over and talk to Catherine about that strange noise.

At nine o'clock I heard the yowling again. It lasted for about five minutes, then it was silent as a tomb. At ten, I thought it was not inappropriately early to be knocking on my neighbor's door.

So I knocked.

There was no answer. I waited for a few minutes, then knocked again. I heard footsteps. Which Catherine would it be today, sparkly Catherine or glum Catherine? She was like one of those Swiss clocks that chime the hour and a little cheerful maiden pops out, or a gloomy troll.

The door opened slowly. She was in the too-big bathrobe, looking sleepy -- and perhaps disgruntled; her hair was charmingly tousled.

"Dearest Catherine, I hate to be a bother but did you hear it last night? The yowling sound?"

"She looked blankly, and shook her head; and as she was forming the word "no," the yowling began again, and it was unmistakably coming from the back of her apartment, probably the bathroom -- which I knew because the floor plans of our apartments are mirror-images.

For a moment she looked resigned. Then she grabbed my arm and pulled me in and closed the door behind me. And I recognized the yowling. It was the complaint of an aggrieved cat.

“You have to promise me that you won’t tell Jeremy.”

I rolled my eyes. “I promise!”

Of course having been raised with cats, I knew what was coming next, but nonetheless, against my better judgment, I nodded my head and followed her up the tiny hall to, exactly as I expected, the bathroom door. She pulled the door open, and I looked into what seemed like a very barren bathroom; a couple of towels, a hairdryer; the walls had been painted a new, bright blue. And then I had to gasp. There, lying in a well-padded box, in a corner next to the bathtub, barely recognizable, was a scrawny, mangy, white cat. One eye seemed to be missing. The cat lifted its head, glared at me with its one eye, then seemed to pass out.

“Oh, my, my... ” I said. “What in the world... ?”

“I found her in the street the other day. She could barely walk -- she was so emaciated, and covered with fleas. Nobody knew who the cat belonged to, and I couldn’t leave her there suffering and alone... I just couldn’t; Jeremy or no Jeremy.” And she started to sob, “There was really no choice. Nobody else seemed to give a damn about her. I couldn’t let her die.”

And she was so distressed that I put my arms clumsily around her and she let me comfort her. “I just couldn’t let her die,” she muttered again.

She stopped crying and blew her nose. “The poor cat let me carry her to the vet. She let me hold her. It was as if she knew I wanted to help her.”

And what did the vet say about her long range prospects?”

She shrugged, and said in a most off-handed way, “The first vet offered to put the cat down, without any charge.”

“Oh.”

“The second vet said she might recover -- except of course for the eye. But cats can do fine with one eye. He put her on antibiotics and got rid of the fleas. You won’t tell Jeremy will you?” her eyes glittered with a fervid urgency.

“A promise is a promise,” I said. “Anyway I feel more allegiance to you than I do to Jeremy, who hasn’t painted my walls in fifteen years. What are you naming the cat?”

“Bebe,” she said.

So I joined the conspiracy, not giving a second thought to her choice of names.

And I didn’t hear from Bebe again.

I did not see much of Catherine for the next week or so. Lucas’s car was sometimes there in the evenings; sometimes not. She seemed to be around a lot during the day, although once or twice I saw her leaving. One time she was dressed in a grey pantsuit and her sunburst hair was pulled back severely in a bun. For a moment, I didn’t recognize her. She waved to me as she was leaving, and stopped for a moment. She looked quite cheerful.

“Another audition, a call back this time. They told me to dress like a sexually repressed girl. That’ll be a stretch,” she laughed.

“How’s the kitty?” I asked, lowering my voice conspiratorially.

“Touch and go,” she answered, and her eyes teared up.

It was the last time I saw her.

I heard the cat yowling right after she left.

Three days later, early Friday night, before the sun had started to set, there was a frantic pounding on my front door. I ran and peeped out the window.

It was Lucas.

He was sweating heavily, as if he had been running. There was a wildness in his eyes that unsettled me.

I opened the door.

“Have you seen Catherine?” He was frightened or nervous or angry, I couldn’t tell which.

“Not for a while, a couple of days... is everything okay?”

He shook his head. “No. She’s not answering her phone. She always answers her phone; she always calls me when I’m away. She didn’t call once.

I've been trying to reach her for the last two days. At first I thought she was punishing me... ” he stopped himself. “I just got back from New York. I came directly from the airport. The front door is bolted from the inside. Do you have a key to the back?”

I shrugged, “Not to her back door. I could call Jeremy.”

“No. I'm going in a window. Have you got a ladder?”

The tension in his voice was mingled with impatience.

“What's going on?” I felt the strange sour feeling of fear, creeping up on me.

“Just get me something to climb on.”

I handed to him my stepladder as he headed out for the back of the house. “The bedroom window,” he said. “That'll be easy to get into.”

“Please, what's happening?” I asked, following him to the back yard, my heart pounding. There was an urgency about the situation that was beginning to feel unreal, as if we were characters in a cheap movie, and something horrible was coming next but we hadn't read the script.

The sky was beginning to darken, and lights were coming on in the neighborhood. But no lights were coming on in Catherine's apartment.

I watched numbly, with growing apprehension, as Lucas tried to force open the window, muttering to himself -- words I couldn't understand,

pleading words -- that much I could tell. And my mind filled with terrible stories -- had she been raped, murdered? Had she been lying there dead for the last two days, been eaten by the cat? Had someone crept in and attacked her while I was out walking my rescue dogs, or having my solitary dinners at my deserted diners? If she were dead -- by foul means -- would I be a suspect? Could I account for my time?

The last fiery blush was on the horizon line and the day would be gone.

Lucas kicked at the window and broke the glass, nearly falling off the stepladder. The sound of breaking glass and his flailing body added to the surreal feeling of twilight.

“What the hell is going on?” I asked again; this time with more intensity, my brain flooding with apprehension and disbelief; this was not really happening; this kind of thing happened to other people, not anyone I knew - - whatever it was that was happening.

Lucas looked back over his shoulder before he climbed in.

“I don’t know,” he said, with anger, which I knew was not directed at me. I could almost smell his fear.

“Should I call 911?” I shouted after him.

“I don’t’ know,” he shouted back.

I ran into my apartment, heart pounding, adrenalin rushing, and got my cell phone. Then I paced outside in the tiny back yard, my head swimming in disbelief and detachment. This was not real. This was not happening in my life. Murder? Could somebody have gotten inside and hurt her? Could Lucas be involved somehow?

The sky was nighttime pink; very few stars were visible. The moon was a pale sliver.

And then I heard a howl so raw it had animal quality.

“NO CATHERINE, NO! NO! NO-O-O-O BABY- NO-O-O-O-O-O-O-
NO...”

And time stood still and that cry seemed to echo in the night.

I dialed 911, and Lucas staggered out the back door.

“Gone. She’s gone...”

And then he almost collapsed; I saw him swaying and ran over and grabbed him as he broke out in gasping heaving sobs.

I held him; as if he were my child.

Never have I experienced such and fear and disbelief and helplessness as I felt then.

And the sirens howled first far away, then closer...

“NO-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O!” And his cry mingled with the sound of the approaching sirens

And then the sirens stopped in the front of the house, and people were running up the driveway to the tiny back yard. After that it was all fast-motion: police arriving, flashlights, voices, questions, searches, sirens, more questions, more sirens, paramedics rushing in, stretchers, firemen, police, questions, bright lights, horror, horror, horror.

And then one of the policemen emerged holding the white cat, which was struggling vigorously but looking very unwell.

“This guy was in there with her,” the cop said, putting the cat down. The cat hobbled over to Lucas and sat there at his feet. Lucas picked the animal up and held it; and the cat settled down.

And we all watched as they carried her out on a gurney, covered with a sheet; she was very small beneath the covering. And we watched as they transferred her to the coroners van, and we watched the van back down the driveway, lights flashing, and we were all in shock; even the cat, who seemed to be watching everything with her one good eye.

“She left a large bowl of cat kibble and water in the bathroom,” Lucas said flatly. “She wanted to make sure the damn cat survived.”

The white cat went home that night with Lucas. Two lost souls.

And as I was futilely trying to fall asleep, I thought of moving out of this duplex for the first time since I had moved in. A pall had been cast over this place.

Later, Lucas told me that she had taken a hefty dose of Halcion, washing it down with Jack Daniels, then put a plastic bag over her head and tied it around her neck. She laid herself down on the bathmat and died in a fetal position with the white cat at her feet; an Egyptian Pharaoh with a pet cat to lead the way to the underworld. He told me that she had been bipolar since her late teens. He told me she had been hospitalized four years ago.

Perhaps, had I known about her history-

“Perhaps”... a pernicious word if ever there was one.

There was a headline obituary in the L.A Times, two days after she died. "FORMER CHILD STAR DIES AT TWENTY-SEVEN" with what was a quarter page announcement, and a picture of her, her hair shining and electric, her smile lovely; one of the prettiest girls ever. The obituary talked about her glowing talent. There was no mention of suicide. I think she would have liked the obituary. But what do I know.

The funeral was a week later, with an impressive turnout. She was buried in Forest Lawn. The burial site overlooked the freeway. It was a beautiful morning.

I went of course, Lucas had personally invited me.

The crowd was large, the coffin small -- white maple.

I cried. I had loved her.

I talked to Lucas a few days later, to find out how he was doing. In the course of the conversation, I asked him about the white cat. There was a long silence; then he told me that when he had returned from the funeral, he found the cat dead on the sofa. On top of a throw pillow that Catherine had given him. It had knocked over an old clock that had stopped at 11:30, just about the time when the coffin was being lowered into the ground.

Now make of that what you will. I certainly will draw no conclusions. But one must say; it was certainly a very odd coincidence for the cat to die at apparently same time that Catherine disappeared forever into the welcoming earth.

There have been several tenants since our beautiful girl left us so abruptly. I don't think Jeremy has told any of the new people about the recent history of the place. He had the front doors of the duplex painted red; good

feng shui. And he painted my walls too; a very creamy color called “Pale Moon.”

I have become very aware of the ever-increasing swiftness of time. I am feeling the need to get to know my world a little better, while I’m still around. I am planning a trip to Alaska this coming summer -- a cruise. I have started eating English muffins for breakfast; sometimes oatmeal, I sometimes have breakfast out.

The cruise ship has a breakfast buffet. I intend to go wild

THE END

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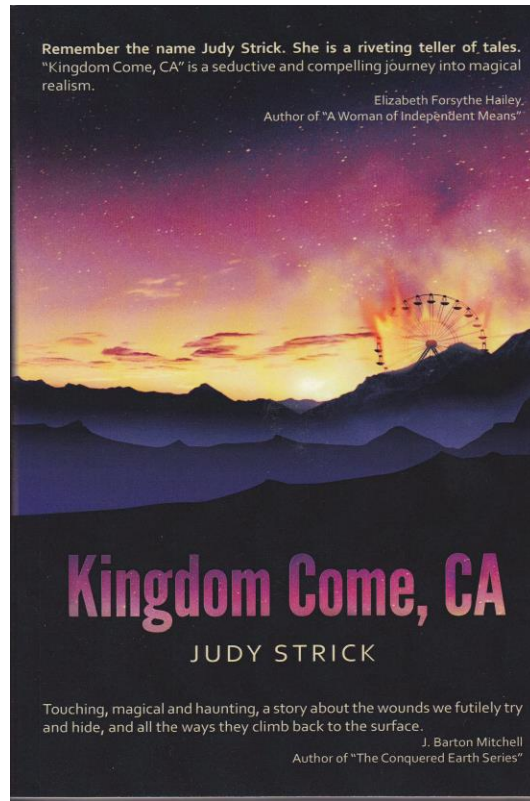
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