

BERIT FORTIER

# TEQUILA SUNRISE

I am sitting on Monica's floor, eating shrimp which have little pieces of shell on them that I find every other bite or so. There must be a hundred people here, none of whom I know nor care to know intimately. I see them every time Monica throws a party, which is every night that Monica decides she needs to reestablish herself as the hub of lesbian nightlife on the Upper West Side. I think I like Monica's parties more than I like Monica. Her parties at least allow me to remain somewhat anonymous and disconnected, neither of which requires much in the way of effort or attention.

Monica, on the other hand, requires both. She greets me as if we're the closest of close, gal pals I think is her clique's word for it, asks me exactly three ever-increasingly piercing questions with the third question always being, "So what really happened between you and

Janet?" Before I can be forced to answer, her eyes light on some other face across the room, and she promptly excuses herself with promises galore to return and resume the conversation.

"Don't go away from this spot," are usually the last words she utters to me all evening.

Of course I do. I find some corner where I can observe human frailty at its finest. Janet used to call it my laboratory pose. Once adopted, she said, I look at everyone and everything as if under a microscope. But that's not the case at all. In reality, I hope to learn by watching and listening. Most of the women here have slept or had some other form of intimate interaction with each other. I found out a long time ago that it's far easier to ask a dyke whom they haven't slept with than whom they have slept with at one of Monica's parties. The answer is always shorter that way. Yet, when all of these women see each other, they hug and kiss each other, and laugh and talk with ease as if nothing traumatic, no lesbian drama

had ever come between them. It doesn't matter, either, if the adulterer is standing with the couple of eternity.

So I watch and listen, hoping to discover their secret for swallowing their feelings (some not so old) of anger and jealousy and most of all, scarred pride. I am determined to find some nugget of knowledge which will help me recover my own sense of self pride, nonexistent since Janet left me.

Janet didn't just leave me. She left the country. One warm day in November, the kind of day when you awaken in the morning and you know something is desperately wrong. A warm front had bounded in, wreaking havoc on my sinuses, a condition I inherited from my father along with a trust fund which set me up for life.

Holding my head, which feels like someone has been using the matter behind my eyes for dart practice, I stumble into the kitchen to get a cup of coffee.

There I am, favorite mug in hand, when it dawns on me that there is no coffee made. This is unusual. Every morning there is coffee, more precisely Cafe Bustelo, simmering softly away in the Three For One coffee maker. But this particular morning the Three For One is not only not on, it's nowhere to be seen. Maybe it is the sinus headache or maybe it is the heat. Maybe it is a combination of the two, but it's as if I still cannot grasp what has happened while I was sleeping. I stand in the middle of the kitchen, temples throbbing, T-shirt slightly damp from the unusually warm temperature, my hair matted down on one side and standing up on the other, trying to remember when I saw the Three For One last. My brain is foggy. I can't think straight.

I start to look through the cupboards, which are arranged in alphabetical order by the item that they contain, another household task analyzed by Janet. Around the third cupboard which houses dry goods, a term I have never heard said by anyone but Janet and general store clerks in old westerns, I am jolted by an odd little thought that Janet has taken the Three For One to be fixed somewhere for some reason. Having squatted through-out my search of cabinets one and two, baking goods and canned goods respectively, I stand up groaning as my muscles, which don't even know they're awake yet, stretch to a more humane position. She must have left a note somewhere, I reason, and start to scan the chairs, tabletops, even the refrigerator for one.

True to an old habit of hers, she has left me a note inside the refrigerator taped to a can of Diet Pepsi. I walk over to the kitchen table while I tear the envelope open. A ring falls out on to the floor, the ring I gave Janet on our first anniversary. Another odd little thought jolts me but this one has nothing to do with coffee. I'm starting to shiver even though the apartment is baking. I slump into a chair. My heart is beating way too fast. My temples are pounding. I uncrease the white paper and read that my life will suck the big one for the next year, that I can expect to cry every day and lose ten pounds that I can't afford to lose, and that I will remove the word trust from my vocabulary for many years to come.

That's not what the note says, of course, that's what I read into it. The let-

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ter actually says, "As you know, it hasn't been good between us for some time." As I know? I thought I was going to get a cup of coffee this morning, that's how much I know. There are quite a few words about this not coming as a surprise (to whom?), "it's" been coming for a long time (how long?), and other similar phrases that I can't quite understand yet. All this time, the ring, the one I had made special by a jeweler friend of ours (ours—better not say that word anymore) and which is really two rings encircling each other, is still on the floor, glistening in the broad ray of sunshine which has split the kitchen in two. I feel like Gollum in the *Lord of the Rings*, horrified as I watch the ring take on a life of its own.

I stare at it. It seems to throb, to grow bigger. I kick at it with such a force that it skates across the floor and disappears under the refrigerator. Well, that's taken care of. I put the letter very neatly back into the envelope, wad it into one ball, open the kitchen window, and throw it out as hard as I can. Out of sight, out of mind.

For the next two hours I empty every cabinet, every shelf, in search of the Three For One. Yes, she told me via her love letter that she had taken it with her to France (what, don't they have coffee makers in Europe?), but I must make certain that she is telling the truth. Maybe Janet has had a breakdown and—and—and... I can't finish the sentence because all the cupboards from A to Z are emptied, and there isn't a joe-maker to be found, and I am sitting crosslegged, my T-shirt getting damper from the tears that I am crying, the cans and boxes of food still arranged by alphabetical order around me.

I am brought back to Monica's living

room by the entrance, really the grand entrance, of a beautiful black woman who floats through the crowd as if she is hooked to the ceiling by invisible wires. As I strain to catch a better look at her through the crowd, I realize my neck is sore from my pulling the ring on its chain back and forth around my neck.

Of course, I retrieved the ring a few days after I had disposed of it under the refrigerator. Using a broom, the broom Janet always used every hour on the hour to keep the kitchen floor spotless, I scraped the ring out and put it around my neck on a chain I found in the back of a drawer. Then I packed my bags and left, leaving my own note to Janet on the toilet. Nice touch, I thought at the time.

I stop tugging at my chain, or my ball and chain, as I sometimes fondly refer to it, and look at the black Venus. She is smiling at me, a big smile, a smile which pulls me toward her and away from my past.

I am having trouble staying out of Venus's blue eyes, which run up and down my body as if they own me. I'm starting to want her to own me, something I haven't wanted in a long, long time. I'm drinking my sixth tequila sunrise. It's starting to taste like day old Teem, but I keep sipping on it anyway.

I have finally realized what it is I wanted to know. All these parties have finally paid off. I hold the key to everything now. All this time I thought there was something deep inside these people that allowed them to carry on conversations with someone that they found in bed with their lover. But it wasn't deep at all. Six tequila sunrises is all it takes. I feel like I could talk to each and every one of them now. I can't believe I never even noticed that all these people must drink tequila sunrises. How stupid of me. Pull

yourself together. Venus is talking to you again.

She tells me that she's a sex-line operator at 1-900-SLAYS-ME. I tell her that I can't believe that she doesn't get off listening to the phone calls she's paid to listen to every night. I'm talking to her about sex and S&M as if they're words or concepts that easily roll off my tongue. I can't tell if she's buying it or not. I feel smooth, though. Now she's saying that if I was on the other end it would be a different story.

"Hah, hah." I laugh.

God, that sounded loud. Her blueness bores into me some more. I ask her if she wants another drink. She accuses me of changing the subject.

"Me?" I ask, looking down into the backwash of my drink that I hold somewhat askew in my hand.

She asks me if I'd like to call her number and hands me a business card that's all done up in black except for the bright red lettering spelling her name, Commanda, and the telephone number. I say sometime maybe I will. Smooth. I ask her if I call if she'll pick up the phone or are there hundreds of operators. I stutter a little. Not much so maybe she didn't notice. I ask her again if she wants a drink. She bores. I ask her if she thinks it's getting hot in here. I start to blabber something about not being very good at this. She asks, at what?

"At this."

I'm starting to feel hotter. Then it all starts to come out. Janet. Me. Even the Three For One part. The whole kit and caboodle. I can't stop myself. I want to stop, but I can't. I tell her I think I'm the one who needs a drink. She laughs, takes my hand, and starts to walk me out. I try to stop and tell her that I have to tell Monica that I'm leaving but she just says, "Monica's a big girl," and she steers me down the hall to the front door.

"I'll make you a deal," I say to her. I'm slurring my words but I go on. "If you want me to go home with you, you have to promise me you won't answer the telephone. You know, if a customer calls or something."

She says something about being hard to get, laughs, and we're almost out the door when we run smack into my ex, Janet, who's looking like she can't decide if this is really me or a pod out of *The Body Snatchers*. ☐

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