

Ghost of a Dance

c 1991 by Daniel Marcus

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I used to enjoy looking at the "wanted" pictures on the post office wall, waiting in line to buy stamps or mail a package. I wondered about the mundane details of their lives -- what they ate for breakfast, whether they flossed their teeth, if they went to the movies on Friday night. I never expected to see a familiar face staring out at me from behind the glass. Alan Shapiro from Ann Arbor. The fifteen years since I'd seen him last had done little to soften the bony, angular planes of his face, but had added a few crow's feet around his eyes, and a streak of gray in his straight, black hair. He looked more embarrassed than anything else, as if he'd been caught twisting the heads off parking meters like Cool Hand Luke rather than committing the sundry acts of mayhem listed below his name. Quite a resume, too -- murder, arson, bank robbery, mail fraud.

Mail fraud, now that was the Alan I knew. He always had some sort of hustle going - smuggling coke up from South America, pre- Colombian art, God knows what else. I remembered a scam he pulled using the classified section of one of the supermarket tabloids.

"Earn thousands of dollars at home", the ad read. "Send \$9.95 and SASE for complete details."

The response was overwhelming: people sent cash, food stamps, Las Vegas casino chips. He sent back instructions for placing a classified ad. A recursive loop. He made close to ten grand before the paper pulled it. He had a string of P.O. boxes under various assumed names and never got caught.

I suppose I shouldn't have been too surprised to see him up there on the post office wall -- I don't think I knew anyone in the old crowd who wasn't something of a sociopath. A small army of us graduated from Michigan and couldn't figure out what to do next, so we hovered and flitted about the cafes and bookstores in Ann Arbor, some of us for years, like mosquitos over an oily, stagnant pond. Every waitress was a budding Adrienne Rich; every car mechanic could quote reams of Bakunin at the drop of a lug wrench. We slept with each other's spouses, complained about Nixon, dealt drugs to each other, and waited for something to happen.

Alan and I had been in a couple of poli-sci classes together and enjoyed each other's nihilistic humor. We fell in love with the same woman and, for a time, when she was seeing both of us, we walked a fine line between politically correct amiability and wanting to rip each other's heart out with a garden trowel. Eventually, Mary moved in with him, and I got into a graduate program in physics at Chicago. We kept in sporadic contact for a little while, but the trickle of occasional letters and post cards from obscure

corners of the globe had dwindled to nothing nearly ten years back. Last I heard they were still together.

We all seemed pretty much the same in our twenties -- uniformly cynical, chemically dependent, directionless, self-obsessed. Some of us drifted into the intelligentsia by inertia and default. Others scratched themselves a corner in the corporate litter box. Still others settled into the comfortable obscurity of the canonical white picket fence. Alan made the ten most wanted list. I didn't understand it, and all week long the shadows of memory seemed to swirl behind and around me like the exhaust fumes from a funky old car. Alan and Mary. Ann Arbor. Mary and me. She had had an unusually strong, pungent scent about her when she was sexually aroused, and suddenly I imagined I could smell her everywhere -- Mary, in restaurants; Mary, waiting for the bus; Mary, lying alone in bed at night. It was unnerving.

She wasn't difficult to find. I called directory assistance in Omaha and got her mother on the fourth try. She didn't remember me, and asked twice if I wasn't a cop or a newspaper reporter before she would give me Mary's address and number. It was in Petaluma, only an hour or so away from me. She wouldn't talk about Alan.

"That sleazy little ferret ruined her life and I hope he fries," she said.

I held onto the number for a week or so. When I finally called, she didn't seem particularly surprised. No, her mother hadn't told her I'd called, they hadn't spoken in months. Mary had always had this dreamy, detached quality about her, as if being present was keeping her from some deeper reverie. To my younger self, it had been compelling and sensual; now, it seemed a bit chilling. Her voice sounded small and tinny over the phone.

"Sure, come on out,' she said. "It'll be just like old times. Don't worry about Alan; he's underground."

Underground?, I thought. Brother...

"Yeah, well, I saw his picture in the post office..."

She seemed amused. "Yeah, the top ten."

The address was way out on the outskirts of town. I drove through a tumble-down section of weed-choked lots, old Darts and Ramblers up on blocks in front of sagging houses, small knots of young Latino men in muscle shirts leaning against cars and lamp-posts, laughing and smoking cigarettes. It seemed to go on forever.

She was sitting at a rust-streaked patio table in the barren front yard of a rambling Victorian that had seen better times. It was mid-day, very hot, and the dust stirred up by my arrival hung motionless in the air. Crawling in the dirt at her feet was the ugliest baby

I'd ever seen. Slack-jawed, eyes like bits of dull black glass, coarse, dark hair the texture of a horse's mane. A ropy strand of drool hung from its mouth.

"Beautiful child," I said.

Her eyes narrowed.

"Down syndrome," she said. "His name is Anwar."

Anwar, Jesus. I felt like a real schmuck.

We sat in uncomfortable silence for a few long seconds, looking each other over. She hadn't changed much. She wore her hair differently now, in sort of a punk pageboy cut. A little red ball at the end of a gold chain dangled from her left ear; her right earlobe held a tight row of five or six shiny black studs, decreasing in size as they curved upwards. She had the kind of features usually described as elfin- small, upturned nose, expressive mouth, but her eyes were set a little too close together, and had a bruised look about them, as if she hadn't slept well the night before. If I hadn't known she was nearly forty, I'd have guessed her age at twenty-eight.

"Something to drink?", she asked.

"Sure, maybe a soda."

She disappeared into the house, Anwar balanced on one shoulder, struggling feebly. She was gone for a long time; at one point I thought I could hear voices coming from deep within the house. Music began to play, sounding clearly through the open window. I recognized the album- Dylan's Blonde on Blonde. I hadn't heard it in years.

She returned with a can of Diet Dr. Pepper for me, a wine cooler for herself. She'd left Anwar in the house. I rolled the can against my forehead, savoring the feel of the cold metal.

"What the hell happened?" I asked.

She shook her head, opened her mouth as if to speak, shook her head again. We sat for a bit, listening to Dylan, sipping our drinks, the silence between us easing the tension, becoming something shared.

She began to speak, softly, as if to herself.

"He met Erlichman in jail, did you know that? He broke into the B. of A. computer, tried to put fifty K in his NOW account. Someone noticed. Datacrime was just becoming fashionable and they wanted to make an example. They sent him to one of those white-collar country clubs and he was in the same cell block as Erlichman. He said he fucked

him in the shower but I don't believe it." She looked up at me with a half-smile, fingering her earring. "Alan would never fuck a Republican."

The heat was oppressive. I could feel beads of sweat trickling down the small of my back. A large insect buzzed past my ear and I flinched. High overhead a hawk circled, effortlessly riding the thermals, hunting.

"Being with him," she continued. "It was like Cheech and Chong meets Bonnie and Clyde. Did you ever hear about the lobster traps?"

I shook my head.

"Christ," she laughed. "Alan boasted about fifty lobster traps off the back of a truck one summer when we were living in New Hampshire, broke. He thought we had it made. He kept saying, 'What we don't sell, we'll eat, What we don't sell, we'll eat.' He borrowed someone's boat and went out one night with a map of the harbor, dropping the traps off. Thing was, though, he was stoned on acid and Wild Turkey, and he forgot to tie buoys to the traps..."

"Buoys," I said. "Yeah, well, I geuss that would be kind of important." The image was ludicrous- Alan perched on the stern of the boat, watching, as one by one, the big wooden cages disappeared into the murky darkness. We laughed together and it felt good, easy. Dylan was singing Leopard Skin Pillbox Hat and when he got to the refrain -"It's your brand new leopard skin pillbox hat"- we crooned along with him and broke up laughing again.

"He sounds more like Jerry Lewis than Al Capone," I said.

"Yeah, well, things started getting a little weird when he got back from the joint. He started getting..." She made circling motions with her hands, looking for the right word. "...political. I mean, not really, but he'd talk about it a lot. He made these little pipe bombs in the garage and set them off in vacant lots. Finally, he planted one in the lobby of the phone company, set to go off in the middle of the night. It killed a night watchman. He freaked out, said we had to go underground. I don't think the cops knew about him yet, he was just freaked."

"Why did you go with him?"

She looked at me with a puzzled expression, as if she had never considered the question before.

"I don't know. I loved him, I geuss." She was silent for a moment. I looked up to see if the hawk was still overhead, but it was nowhere in sight. Probably eating lunch.

"Being on the run really sucked, though. Cheap motels, crappy hick cable tv stations. The farm report, bible shows, Donna Reed reruns at 9:30 every night. Microwave burritos."

She shuddered. "Alan really started going off the deep end. He'd do this Travis Bickle routine- go out and rent a VCR and a copy of Taxi Driver and bring it back to the motel, strap on his guns and when DeNiro got to his psycho act, the part where he goes 'You talkin' to me?' in the mirror, Alan would say the lines along with him, waving this pistol around in the air the size of a Buick. God, it was creepy. I couldn't tell if it was life imitating art or vice-versa. "

She shook her head.

"One night, he went out to get a pack of cigarettes, came back completely out of his mind, dragged me out of bed, told me to get behind the wheel and drive. He wouldn't talk to me after that. I drove all night, heard on the radio the next morning that two people had been shot to death in a mom 'n' pop store holdup." She gave a nervous little laugh. "Mom 'n' pop, I geuss. There were witnesses. I split later that day. The cops didn't know who I was yet, and I didn't want to go out like Faye Dunaway and what's-his- name."

Warren Beatty, I thought, but didn't say anything. She leaned back in her chair and looked away, towards the house. In profile her face was very beautiful. From somewhere inside, Anwar began to cry. We both stood up.

"Maybe you should go," she said.

"Yeah, that's probably a good idea."

We looked at each other for a long time, not speaking, and then she turned and walked back into the house.

I found the Petaluma-Pt. Reyes Road and drove west, very fast, following the smooth contours of the rolling, brown hills. Sometimes, when I reached the crest of a hill, just before descending into the next valley, I could catch a glimpse of the ocean. It was a little closer each time.