

Vicky Deger

The Motel

As I pulled a vibrating cell phone from my jeans pocket and read the display my internal speedometer went from zero to a hundred and eighty in less than a second; my heart raced, my palms turned instantly clammy, my cheeks felt hot. I was tucked in against the washing machine folding an overdue pile of laundry. Sebastian was upstairs finishing his math homework, Jaxson downstairs in front of an episode of the Simpsons doodling on the back of a fruity pebbles cereal box. A bay leaf infused Spaghetti Bolognese simmered on the stove. It was Derrick, whose number I should have deleted years ago. Derrick, the source of more emotional pain than I care to admit. Derrick, the man I loved more than any man on this planet. I folded and stacked another pair of Spiderman underpants, counted the rings and answered before it went to voice mail.

“What are you wearing baby?” He spoke with a throaty confidence. I’d not heard from him in more than a year.

“A tattoo and a smile.” I answered. We liked our banter. “Where are you?”

“In Hollywood, wanna take me to Musso and Frank’s?”

“You know I do.”

We arranged to meet at a Motel on Sunset. No name, just a red flashing Motel sign. The boys and I were living with a Canadian roommate at the time, he agreed to watch the kids.

Derrick and I had met five years earlier. We’d spotted each other across a crowded Hollywood art gallery and had fallen in love on the spot. We both had pink hair. But, as it turned out, he was married. For the next three years he lived between his wife

and the boys and I. He called it The Rubber Ball Syndrome. She'd kick him out, I'd welcome him and his guitar strumming, song swooning ways, with open arms. Derrick was an ex punk rocker. He'd been the front man for a band in the early 90's. He'd had a deal with Capital Records then lost it, but since had reinvented himself as a music video hero, a casting director, a celebrity fisherman and was presently working as a cameraman for an internet hunting and fishing program. His six foot three stature made me feel feminine and protected. His randomly inked body made me feel pure, soft and yet somehow dangerous. What he and I had, together, was special. We had something he didn't have with his wife. We lit up a room. I loved us for that. I loved that in three inch heels I'd tuck in under his cowboy hat and stand eye to eye. I loved that when he held my hand and lead me across a street people stared. That strangers assumed we were "somebodies" because we looked too good not to be. Being with Derrick was like being famous without having to deal with paparazzi.

Derrick, who was an exceedingly beautiful man, drank vodka for breakfast, worshipped NASCAR Sundays, helped little old ladies fill their cars with gas, hunted deer, and wrote me love songs that, without fail, brought me to tears.

I pulled up the to the Motel in my black convertible Camaro. An impractical vehicle I had bought on a whim. I'd driven past the Motel often on my trips down sunset to the YMCA where the boys had taken swimming lessons and played in the ball-room while I worked out. I'd never looked beyond the neon sign, which at night flashed O-T-E-L. The rooms were stacked around a parking lot in a two-story horseshoe facing the street. The allocated parking spots were narrow, and crooked, as if hand painted without a guide. Jaxon had a two-storied parking lot built into one of his Hot Wheels

contraptions. He'd crowd the cars in and was often frustrated with not having enough room to open the tiny doors. I felt a similar frustration as I squeezed out between my car and a Burgundy 1980's Cadillac.

The motel structure was textured stucco, and painted beige. The two dozen or so sets of doors, windows, and trim, were the same beige but in a gloss – the drips and inconsistencies blared under the florescent exterior lighting. Most of the doors had numbers on them, and on the ground floor was an identical door with a red and gold aluminum sign that read "Reception". The door was slightly ajar. A dark haired, dark skinned man with a Middle Eastern accent asked me if he could help, I assured him I was fine and knew where I was going.

Derrick was standing at the railing in front of his room on the second level. He had a beer in one hand a cigarette in the other. Florescent shadows had settled under his eyes and on the side of his face, not unlike the face the boys get when they shine the flashlight under their chin and try to scare each other.

"Welcome to Paradise."

I just about tripped over my boots when I saw him. It was as if a pilot light sitting dormant in my lower abdomen had been suddenly ignited. The fire heaved its way through my body till I felt it in the tips of my ears. His hair was longer and black, his shirt unbuttoned to just above his pierced navel revealed a tattooed history, all of which I knew intimately. "En Dios Yo Confio", which translates to In God I Trust, lays out broadly across his six packed stomach. He'd grown up in Echo Park, the inscription had been intended to keep the 14 year old Derrick safe from the neighborhood bullies. The Egyptian symbol for "psychic children", a thick line and a wave, is inked in blue above

his heart. His arms are long and tone. They canvas various images and philosophies: three erect surfboards labeled life, love and soul; a hammerhead shark; a fist holding a black revolver; a black heart that once housed the letter “V” but his wife had made him cover up; a small smiley face with clock hands as a reminder that life is short and its important to have fun; a silhouette of young boy praying; the key shaped Mayan symbol for happiness; an orange leukemia awareness ribbon; a colorful portrait of a naked women nailed to a cross, labeled with Chinese writing that translates to “sweet and sour chicken”; and three blue spear type symbols that represent the purity of the nature.

The trip up the stairwell was sticky. It was a small cell block of stairs within cinder block walls. It reeked of human piss and evidence of freshly marked excretions dripped down the walls to puddles on the floor. I tip toed and stepped side to side to assure I got as little on the bottom of my shoes as possible. On the short journey up the stairs I counted 4 condoms, 2 syringes, 1 flip flop, 1 ticket stub to Lion King at Pantages, a toothbrush and an empty wallet. I wondered about the wallet. Wondering who came in with an identity and left without. My brown and white pokadotted pocketbook felt heavy on my shoulder, I shifted it and completed a mental inventory. Wallet, keys, cell phone, lip gloss, tampon, sharpie, seam ripper, plastic soldier. Some years earlier, a five year old Jaxon had frantically called me into the bathroom where he was lying in the bath on his back. “ Look Vicky, look Vicky,” he said excitedly while repeatedly pointing to his erect penis that was stacked with three plastic soldiers. I cannot be sure the soldier that found its way to the inside pocket of my purse was not one of the bath brigade.

I found it fascinating that I had become not only accustomed to, but passionately in love with Derrick’s cigarette and stale alcohol feter. I’d given the subject much

thought and finally come to the conclusion that it, this often foul aroma, was my kryptonite. A super hero I will never be, but ironically I felt my most super, my most indestructible when I was around Derrick. And yet over the years, on so many occasions this sense of power, this strength was pulled from under me. So he was my power and the taker away of power all at once. My creator and my poison.

Having arrived on the second floor I tucked up under his shoulder and wrapped myself up in his deliciousness. He smiled, looked into my eyes and told me he loved me. That he'd missed me. I echoed his pledge, moved my mouth to his, and sucked gently at his bottom lip till he smiled and pulled it away. He took me by the hand and we walked into room 17.

The room, lit by a harsh overhead bulb, was not much bigger than the queen sized bed, two side tables and dresser it housed. The ceiling was low with a scattering of resin burns and holes. It smelled like cheap cigarettes, cheap cologne and cheap pussy. To the left was a bathroom housing a leaky shower with a detachable head, a salmon colored toilet, cracked subway tile, and a serious mold growth on the far right corner. Derrick closed the door behind us. I considered putting my purse down on top of the bed cover but the combination of burn holes and too many 60 Minutes stories about what exactly a forensic swab will locate on a motel bed cover, kept me from it. Instead I placed it on the side table and stood by the bed, wrapping myself around the arm of the man I had loved and lost, over and over and over again. Then he pulled out a clear plastic crack pipe. It had tiny ornamental flowers imbedded in its tip, and squeezed in amongst the miniature bouquet was a note reading "I love you". I'd been curious what those cute clear plastic tubes for sale near the counter at the liquor store were for. I'd never smoked crack, and

was surprised he was even offering. Ha, what a difference three years can make. But this was Derrick, the man I adored, the man whose arms I was going to die in. So, like the good little love-intoxicated girl that I was, I agreed to try. He loaded it, lit it and sucked hard and long. He held it in, and slowly, professionally, released a train of a sickly sweet smoke that smelt like burnt sugar cookies. It was all so wrong, my being there. I felt like I was wearing twenty pound weights on my shoes and had been thrown in the ocean with nowhere to go but down. Suddenly all wrong. I had burned a batch of sugar cookies once. Sebastian had found a recipe on the Internet and asked if we could make cookies for he, Jaxon and I. He'd gone to the store by himself to buy the ingredients. It was bath time, homework time, and I was outside on the phone when I got the whiff from the kitchen and realized I'd forgotten the cookies. He'd put me in charge of the timing. His sweet face was so sad, he'd wanted to pack some for he and his little brother for lunch the next day.

Derrick passed me the pipe. A burn hole in the carpet, suddenly eye-like, stared up at me and winked. I felt sick to the stomach, wanted to go home to blow raspberries on Jaxon's outie belly button, tickle Sebastian till he laughed so hard that snot shot out of his nose, but instead I inhaled, exhaled, and sure enough, was in love, all over again.

Within moments of exhaling I felt an intensity of pleasure completely beyond anything I had ever experienced. Suddenly floating in the most wonderful state of consciousness, I had the most acute sense of being alive. Derrick and I were one, we were together, I loved us more than I ever had. My head and heart felt 100% clear, 100% true. Fearless. I felt like I'd jumped out of a plane without a parachute. I felt the air pressure pounding up on my face, pulling my wrinkles taught, my skin back, revealing

the youthfulness I'd had that day at the gallery. We were free falling. Swirling, spinning, summersaulting our way to the stained paisley carpet. Parachutes are over rated, safety nets so unnecessary. My super hero cape bellowed behind me, flapping up and slapping over my shoulders. I made buzzing sounds between my lips and dropped my head back slowly before flopping on to the side of the bed where I found myself eye level with Derrick's lap. He packed another pipe while I, slowly and meticulously, sucked and coddled the most beautiful penis I knew. Derrick slept around, he had been with men, he shot heroin on occasion. Derrick and I did not use condoms.

We smoked a lot of crack that night. Making three separate trips to the donut store on the corner of Hollywood and Gower where we met the teenage kid who for twenty dollars would spit out a ballooned bag of crack from his mouth onto my palm. Derrick drove us around in my Camero. We held each others thighs from across the consol. The crack was wrapped in tiny rubber balloons. The kid wore a do rag, an oversized NY Yankees jacket, and baggie jeans with embroidery on the pockets that hung off his backside. His eyes told stories I did not want to know. The boys and I had paid clowns for balloon animals; dogs, monkeys, giraffes, but this was the first time I'd paid a clown for dope. As is in keeping with clowns, silence prevailed. No words were exchanged. No words necessary.

Back at the motel we'd climb back up the rabbit hole, then smoke more crack in room 17 or on the ledge overlooking the parking lot. As the hours passed we became less and less cautious with our smoking. We were hanging outside the room on the railing, talking too loudly. Eventually the dark haired, dark skinned reception man yelled and told us we had to leave. Something about "not to smoking the Crack in his Otel".

Derrick and I cruised Hollywood, feeling like super heroes but ever succumbing to our individual kryptonites. His the drugs, mine, his being. We stopped for last call at the Frolic Room where we made fast friends with strangers. Derrick introduced me as his wife. I liked it when he did that. The lights from the neon beer signs were overly bright and jumped out from the wall towards a mix of over produced Hollywood hipsters and tourists in plaid shirts and tube dresses. We exchanged business cards with a couple who might have been from Ohio and discussed a meeting place and time for the following evening that we had every intension of showing up for, but wouldn't. I told the bartender, an older guy, that it was my birthday. Not sure why. We never made it to Musso and Frank's, frankly I'd spent enough money on crack to have consumed two dozen oysters and half a dozen martinis.

We sat in the car outside his friends place in Silverlake while a new day edged its way up from the behind the high-rises of Downtown. I buried my face in his neck, cried quietly and breathed him in as deeply as I could. I didn't know when I'd see him next but was well aware it couldn't be soon.

It had been a few hours since I'd had a hit, and for the first time that evening I felt a sense of shame, a sense of "what the fuck was I thinking?" Where had that feeling of euphoria gone? Where was my 100% clear mind? I was lonely. I contemplated driving myself back to the donut shop, stopping at a liquor store for a clear plastic pipe of love. A little demon had been awakened in my brain, a kicking and screaming devil child, madly waving its little arms, jumping up and down, wanting to come out and play. But instead I drove down Franklin Ave towards my house, passing cleaning ladies waiting at bus stops, dawn patrol joggers and dog walkers.

The house smelled like dryer sheets, lemon grass candles, and a soured last night's dinner. I spent some time in the kitchen scrubbing the clumps of spaghetti bolognaise off the frying pan and wiping down the counters before heading up stairs where I pulled off my leather pants and nylon camisole, crawled into my pillow topped, white linen-ed bed and closed my eyes. My brain was noisy, buzzing with a sickly sweet residue. I pulled the duvet up over my face. The nanny would arrive in a couple of hours, and I knew my only road to sanity was to wake up with the boys and join in their naive reality over Cheerios. Mine was not a place I wanted to linger.